**A New Identity**

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I could see the disappointment in my father’s eyes and I immediately knew that I would be keeping my name as it was. Michele and I had been discussing how we would be known once we were married. One of the possibilities we were considering is either my using Rehm as an additional middle name or hyphenating our last names. I mentioned this to my parents and although he said nothing the expression on my father’s face told me all I needed to know.

My father, I am certain, quickly knew the practical reality of either choice. My middle name would be lost in the process. Yes, it would be on my birth certificate and maybe a few official documents, but for all practical purposes, Maurice would likely disappear as a significant marker in my identity. Like a lot of first sons, I had been given my dad’s first name as my middle name. This identity mattered to my dad and because it mattered to my dad it mattered to me.

How are we known? How will we be known? My mom continued calling me Timmy right up to the very last. In case you are wondering, she is the only one with the authority to do so. Growing up I now and then heard myself referred to as Timothy, but that generally came with a very distinctive accent and typically signaled I was in some type of trouble. TIMOTHY. Now and then Michele refers to me as TIMOTHY and when she does it seldom has the sound of endearment. Timothy, of course, does sound better if you put Dr. in front of it or Pastor. Like all of you the identities I assume are many: pastor, colleague, spouse, father, friend, neighbor, brother, uncle, to name just some of them.

Our Gospel lesson today, with the baptism of Jesus at its center, is about identity and because this identity matters for Jesus, ultimately it matters for us as well. How will Jesus be known? How will we be known?

But, before we get to the identity of Jesus, Luke introduces us to the people who are struggling with and questioning the identity of John the Baptist. “As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah”.

Biblical scholars tell us there is good reason the people are raising serious questions about the identity of John the Baptist. As one scholar notes mothers and grandmothers continue telling their children stories about the people of Israel. They tell stories about Abraham and Sarah and how they as a people are expected to live as a blessing for all nations. They tell stories about Moses, Miriam and Aaron and how God gave them these leaders to set them free from slavery in Egypt. They tell stories about the prophets who spoke out against unjust rulers, comforted the people in Babylonian Exile and who continued insisting God’s justice was at work in the world.

Like all of the people in the region, the Israelites live under the oppressive domination of Rome with its brutality, inequity and suffering, especially the poor. The mothers and grandmothers tell these stories to their children and as a result have nourished an expectation that God will send them a leader to set them free. It should come as no surprise to anyone that people might wonder if John the Baptist is the one who they are expecting.

In the first place John the Baptist is preaching out in the wilderness and baptizing in the Jordan River. Scholar John Dominic Crossan poignantly and precisely notes that every Jew would know “the wilderness is more than sand and the Jordan is more than water.” Both represent the liberation, justice memory of the people whose God led them out of oppression, through the wilderness and across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. If you have come to proclaim that God is about to do something new, overturning the powers of domination, than there is no better place to proclaim this massage than in the wilderness. There is no better place to be made ready for this coming change than to be baptized in the Jordan River, these waters of liberation and freedom.

“The people are filled with expectation and all are questioning in their hearts concerning John.” Who can blame them? John’s message is a prophetic message, unflinching in his challenge to the ruling elite like King Herod. John the Baptist believes things are so bad and the world looks so hopeless that the only way things will improve is if God directly intervenes by cleaning house of all those responsible for the suffering, poverty and injustice which afflicts the people. John’s language is uncompromising and it essentially means the punishment and annihilation of all those who oppose God. John Dominic Crossan and other scholars refer to John’s message as apocalyptic eschatology. Who is John the Baptist? Is John the one? It is a question of identity.

All of the Gospels struggle with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist because it raises such difficult issues. How does one proclaim Jesus as the incarnational presence of God if Jesus is a follower of John? How can Jesus be the one who sets us free from the many sins that oppress us if Jesus himself is in need of baptism? Each Gospel in their own way tries to address these questions because these questions are about the identity of the One who we come to claim as Christ. Who is Jesus? It is a crucial question because in asking who is Jesus we are also asking who are we?

This brief story given to us by Luke offers several insights into the identity of Jesus. First, by coming out into the wilderness and being baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus is fully embracing the prophetic tradition of liberation and justice that have shaped the lives of the Jewish people. Mary, Jesus’ mother, has told these same stories to Jesus and in these waters Jesus claims them as his own. As one commentator notes, Jesus baptism is a renunciation of the status quo in favor of a new world that God is bringing into being.

Second, Luke gives us a picture of Jesus standing in line with all the other people waiting to be baptized. Luke says, “now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized…” There is no line budging on the part of Jesus. There is no claiming first class status that enables him to go ahead of all the others. On the contrary the picture we are given of Jesus is one who stands with the people, who stands with us, neither above nor below, but a brother in the struggle for a better world, living in alignment with the love and justice of God. Jesus comes to baptism as one of the people, one of us, in solidarity, sharing our brokenness, sharing our loss, sharing our struggles. Dr. Chris Mato Nunpa, a Dakota Elder regularly makes a crucial distinction between non-Dakota people who are by-standers and those non-Dakota people who are up-standers. By-standers observe all the genocide and historic injustices perpetrated on the Dakota and other Indigenous people and do nothing. Up-standers continue looking for ways in which to stand with and be engaged with the Dakota people in their struggle for justice. In his baptism Jesus takes the identity of an up-stander.

Third Luke tells us that for Jesus baptism is an act of prayer and that while in prayer the Spirit of God is made known. From the very beginning the healing, the teaching, the prophetic preaching of Jesus is made possible because Jesus draws on a strength that is beyond himself. The identity of Jesus is as one in whom the spirit of God is so fully present that people come to speak of him as part of God. But, the crucial point of connection is that Jesus is fully open to this power and strength available to us all.

Fourth in baptism the identity of Jesus is confirmed in an affirmation that continues reverberating to this day, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” This affirmation of God’s love signals a fundamental shift with Jesus and John. Jesus embraces John’s critique about the injustice in our world. Jesus embraces John’s sympbolic stance in the wilderness and baptism in the Jordan River, with its expectation of freedom and liberation. Jesus departs from John when it comes to the expectation of an avenging God who will set all things right. The identity of Jesus as the beloved of God, is an identity that no longer relies on a punishing God, but rather claims the love of God is at work now whenever there is healing offered for our brokenness, whenever we care for those in need, when we stand up for justice, when we live as up-standers.

Who is Jesus? Who are we? Our answer to the first question will speak volumes about our answer to the second. How will Jesus be known? How will we be known? It is a question of identity for each and everyone. Today, we ordain and install elders who will provide leadership as we respond to those ongoing questions of identity for Cherokee Park United Church, this community of faith, the beloved of God.

**Isaiah 43:1-7**

*Our first lesson is a word of assurance to the people of Israel and all people who seek to live in faithfulness to God. The people are in Exile and even though life is far from what they would desire or hope, they are reminded of God’s love which is the source of their existence, the source of their redemption and because of that love they need never fear.*

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and  
my daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

*In our second lesson Luke tells us how the ministry of John the Baptist has caused many to wonder if John is the one for whom people have been longing and who will lead them in throwing off the oppressive bonds of Rome. John points them toward one who is to come. Then in brief and concise language Luke tells us about the baptism of Jesus and the identity he receives in the waters of the Jordan River.*

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."  
  
Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."