

Title: Remind Me Again Who I Am
Text: Isaiah 43: 1 – 4; Luke 3: 15 – 16, 21 -22
Date: January 13, 2019

I heard an old story this past week that I thought fit perfectly for today. It had been passed down in Jewish tradition for generations. As the story is told, Rabbi Akiva was born in the first century, not long after the life of Jesus. Late one afternoon Rabbi Akiva was walking along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee on his way home to Capernaum. The sun was beginning to set while he was walking along meditating on the scriptures. He was so absorbed in his reflections that he didn't realize that instead of taking a left turn toward the city gates, he had taken a right turn as the sun sank behind the mountains. He discovered that the path had taken him to the large gate of a Roman fortress. As Rabbi Akiva stood in front of the gate realizing what had happened, he heard a loud voice coming down from above the gate. It was the voice of a Roman guard standing on the top of the wall. The guard shouted down to this stranger in a booming voice.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Rabbi Akiva was so startled that he could only respond to these frightening words with, **"What?"**

Again, the guard called out. **"Who are you? What are you doing here?"**

Rabbi Akiva had a moment to gather his thoughts, and shouted back up into the dark at the Roman guard, **"How much do you get paid to ask me these questions?"**

Now it was the guard who was confused. After a few moments of silence he responded with, **"Two drachma per week."**

Then Rabbi Akiva responded to the guard with intense conviction saying, **"I'll double your salary if you stand outside my house and ask me those two questions every morning!"**

I love this little story! Clearly Rabbi Akiva understood the power of these penetrating questions: **"Who are you? What are you doing here?"** Sadly we forget, so we need to be brought face to face with these questions of identity and purpose again and again. It occurred to me that *both* of these passages that we read this morning touched on this need to be reminded again of who you are.

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It is believed that our Old Testament passage today was written in a pretty anxious time. People were not at all sure there would be a happy ending. When we first read it, it might have seemed full of affirmations to put on your mirror, but scholars believe that this passage was probably written for the Israelite exiles in Babylon. One can only imagine that their faith might have been wearing thin at this point. So then, we have plenty of *situational* words of encouragement. ⁵ **Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.**" (43:5) The people in exile will be gathered up. ² **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.**" (43:2) We have imagery here that sounds very much like a second Exodus. All this is extraordinary encouragement relating to their stressful situation. One can only wonder if they truly heard it.

But beyond this *situational* encouragement, there is a deeper level of *relational* encouragement. They are reminded that God is their Creator (v. 1), so *of course* God has a vested interest in them. We read: **"I have called you by name, you are mine."** (43:1) The nature of this compassionate relationship is made as clear as possible when we read: **"You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."** (43:4) There is no indication of anything they did to earn this affection, and it is not at all related to their circumstance. It is just a clear statement of God's love. And while there is talk *about* God's love elsewhere, I am pretty sure this is the only first-person quote in the Bible where God says, **"I love you."** So *that's* worth putting on your refrigerator! They need to be reminded again. They needed to hear that booming voice from on high.

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Something similar is going on in our New Testament passage. We read that when Jesus was baptized, "a voice came from heaven, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** (Luke 3:22) A powerful reminder of the essential identity of Jesus. A reminder of who he was, and a reminder of whose he was. He knew that he was The Beloved. Because he was totally secure in that knowledge, he was never anxious about his resume, or anxious about being a people pleaser.

We've talked about this before, but we all need regular reminders. We've talked before about the True Self, and the false self. Very simply put, your True Self is that part of you that knows who you are on the deepest level, and whose you are. Your false self is just who you think you are.

When you introduce yourself at a social gathering, you go through this little ritual of explaining who you think you are. You might say you were born in Morgantown and went to University High School. You might say you went to the University of Maryland at College Park, and that now you are a CPA. You might say you are married, and have two grown kids. You might say you do woodworking in your spare time, and that you have season tickets to the Contemporary American Theater Festival. You might think of all this as little clues about who you are. These may all be true statements . . . but this is your False Self.

Listen carefully now. Richard Rohr says, **"Your False Self is not your bad self, your inherently deceitful self, the self that God does not like or you should not like. Actually your False Self is quite good and necessary as far as it goes. It just does not go far enough, and it often poses and thus substitutes for the real thing. . . . The False Self is bogus more than bad."** Instead of referring to this as your False Self, some prefer to think of this as your "small self."

Sadly, many people know nothing of themselves beyond this small self. Those who live out of this False Self tend to be anxious - anxious about their image, concerned about success, and those who get upset when things don't go their own way. The manifestations of this can be quite subtle.

Jesus was an extraordinary example of someone living out of his True Self. He got the message of his baptism. As this relates to us, Richard Rohr says, **"Christians are told at Baptism we are sons and daughters of God. It takes the rest of our lives to believe our Baptism. We don't have to earn our place; we already have it."** That is why on this Sunday – referred to as Baptism of the Lord Sunday – many churches seize on this opportunity to encourage the faithful to remember their own baptism.

Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, passionately reminded people to **"Remember your baptism!"** In his catechism, Luther wrote, **"A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily**

baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day *who* we are, and *whose* we are, and how beloved we are.

John Leith, a Presbyterian professor and theologian, liked to say that every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: **"In baptism the child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, and individuality, a name, a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and intention of the . . . creator of heaven and earth."** [from *"An Awareness of Destiny,"* in *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian*, pp 126-127]

When I was living in Chiang Mai, Thailand I enrolled my son in Nakornpayap International School with the hopes of him developing his English skills so we could at least talk to each other. At the end of the year they published a yearbook where they invited parents and businesses to take out advertising space to help underwrite the cost of the publication. I took out a quarter-page ad with a simple message: "Nathan. My beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." He clearly did not grasp the scriptural allusion, and I am not sure these words were seen at the time as anything special. Oh well. I knew the intention that I brought to it. I do hope that some day he might stumble upon this old yearbook, and the pieces might fall into place in his psyche. These are words he needs to hear in the deep places of his heart. These are words we all need to hear in the deep places of our hearts.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" On a similar vein, Cynthia Bourgeault contends that Jesus **"asked those timeless and deeply personal questions: What does it mean to die before you die? How do you go about losing your little life to find the bigger one? Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror Divine Being itself?"** If only we could hire someone to ask us these questions daily. We so easily forget.

Perhaps this is where the invitation to having a daily mediation practice comes. After all, we don't need intellectual answers to these questions. We need heart answers. We need to be still long enough to recognize that there is something within us that is resonating at the same frequency as the Divine. As Henri Nouwen says, **"Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply."**

So there you have it. We do indeed need daily reminders of our true identity, but if we can't find someone to shout daily reminders to us, we can develop a daily practice to hear the reminders from within.

Amen.

Isaiah 43: 1 – 4

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. ²When 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. ³For 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. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

Luke 3: 15 – 18, 21 - 22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning

John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. . . . ²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and 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."