

“Torn” GPPC 1-7-18
Psalm 29, Mark 1:4-11

Who do you think you are? *Who* do you think you are?

It’s an important question, isn’t it? What would you say if somebody asked you, “Who do you think you are?” Maybe you would answer. “I’m male.” “I’m female.” “I’m a child, a youth, a young adult, middle-aged, old, ancient, older than dirt.” “I’m an American.” “I’m a Southerner.” “I’m a transplanted Northerner.” “I’m African-American.” “I’m white.” “I’m gay.” “I’m straight.” “I’m wealthy.” “I’m poor.” “I’m middle-class.” (Or as the country song goes, “I’m above the below and below the upper.”) “I’m a human being.” “I’m a nice person.” “I’m a forgiven sinner who, on my better days, is trying to sin less.”

Who do you think you are? How we see ourselves and understand who we are is crucial. It shapes not only our attitudes but also our behaviors.

Heidi Grogan works with SAS, Servants Anonymous Society, an organization that helps women who’ve been sexually abused and exploited. She says one of the SAS volunteers was disappointed when,

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after a year, she visited a house her church had renovated for these women, only to find that the home's window blinds were broken and there were stains on the countertop. The volunteer wondered aloud if the women were thankful for what they'd received. "Yes [answered Grogan]...but uncomfortable in a house that does not match how they feel inside. You are offering hospitality by repainting, repurchasing living room blinds. You are insisting the women are beautiful, and that you are waiting for them to see it too, that they belong in a beautiful home. For now though, new girls will make their home affirm their poor self-image." Grogan says finally, "The volunteer looked at the damaged drywall, the marks on the walls. She made the connection to the newest resident, whose body had been a punching bag, whose arms bore scars from self-harming." (Heidi Grogan in *Weavings*, XXIX:1, 8.)

It matters who we think we are. And maybe we can call to mind other places and people whose self-image has been knocked so low that it shows in how they look and how they live. Maybe to one degree or another, we have also been those hurting people. And, with that in mind, maybe we can judge less and be more merciful to others and ourselves.

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In one of William Kent Krueger's novels we hear two brothers talking to each other. Jake says, "There are some things you can't run from, Frank..." "What do you mean?" "Who you are. You can't run from that. You can leave everything behind except who you are." (William Kent Krueger, *Ordinary Grace*, 265.)

We can move to a new location, try a new school, begin a new job, find a different friend or partner or spouse, you name it, we can leave everything behind, except who we are. We cannot run from that. And that's actually okay. Mark tells us why it's okay.

Like the other gospel writers, he says that John the Baptist bursts into history as a kind of holy anachronism, an Old Testament prophet clad in a strange prophet suit and eating weird prophet food. And he is not only odd but great and the people hear his message and come streaming out to confess their sins and be baptized. John is a spiritual giant. But he says, "Compared to the one who is coming, this Jesus, I'm nothing. I'm not even fit to untie his sandals. I've baptized you with water, but he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit; he will drench you with God's very presence."

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So far so good. Great John proclaiming much greater Jesus. The story hums along and it's a smooth narrative. But then with no warning at all Mark tells us Jesus comes from Nazareth and John baptizes him in the Jordan River.

Clank.

Among other things, baptism symbolizes the washing away of sin. So if Jesus is the sinless Savior of the world, isn't it bizarre, even shocking, that he would be baptized? In fact, in Matthew's version of the story, John actually argues with Jesus and says, "Hey, I shouldn't be baptizing you; *you* should be baptizing me!" But Mark seems unperturbed by the baptism of Jesus. Maybe he interprets it as God in Jesus coming down into the rushing, muddy river of human existence to share our messy life with us. Maybe that's how he sees it. But we don't know, because he doesn't focus on it and he doesn't say.

He focuses on something else—what happens in the baptism of Jesus. In his baptism, Jesus sees and hears his identity confirmed in ways that are unmistakable and unshakeable.

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Jesus comes up out of the Jordan River and instead of just seeing a pretty blue sky dappled with clouds, he sees “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit of God descending like a dove on him.” The phrase “the heavens torn apart” does not occur anywhere else in the Bible. The Greek verb used here means to rip apart. In one devastating moment of clarity, God rips the heavens open, breaching what seemed to be a safe, impenetrable boundary between heaven and earth, and sending God’s Spirit descending like a dove swooping down. Why? Why such drama?

Because God is going to answer the question, “Who do you think you are?” A voice from heaven, God’s voice says to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The words are quotes from the Bible and they declare that Jesus is (1) God’s royal Son, (2) God’s beloved, and (3) God’s Servant. This is who Jesus is—the one supreme revelation of God, God’s love personified, and God’s servant action in the world.

In this New Year we will be presented with a dizzying array of voices competing for our allegiance. These voices will claim to be worthy of our complete devotion. They will promise to quench our

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thirst, satisfy our hunger, allay our fears, and fulfill our dreams. But they will only be partially successful.

Instead, there is this Jesus for whom God tears open the heavens, breaking down the scared border between the divine and us, coming down to be with us as Lord and Savior. He alone can completely deliver what he promises, because he alone is divine Son, Beloved, with whom God is well pleased. Jesus *is* who God says he is.

And who do you think you are? We are children of God and followers of this Christ. So our invitation this New Year is to dive into being disciples of Christ, to affirm and reaffirm what we believe, to commit and recommit to life that is shaped in the contours of his teaching and empowered by the Spirit in which he baptizes. Despite all well-meaning talk of the “purple church,” what actually defines each of us is not the blue or red color of a particular political party we may support but the clear water that drips down our heads in baptism. As one scholar asks, “‘Why does baptism matter?’ It matters because we are who God says we are.” (Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark*, 36.)

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We are baptized and that means the direction and meaning of our lives are found in Jesus Christ. And that means we are precious beyond measure. We are utterly forgiven of our sins and told not to dwell upon them but to move forward in bold service.

It's true that you cannot run away from who you are, but in Christ we do not need to run away. Baptized into Christ, we expect God to tear apart heaven and surprise us again and again with strength we had not known available. With courage beyond ourselves. With a kind word we had not expected. With an imperfect yet loving community to sustain, encourage, and challenge us. And truly with a sure sense of who we are because of *whose* we are—God's children, part of the Body of Christ.

In this New Year as we begin again, let me leave you today with one spiritual discipline to try. I saw it on the Internet. So it must be true, right? Scientists have discovered what scripture and our faith have been teaching for thousands of years. Gratitude will change and even save our lives. Here is what the scientists and theologians suggest. The next time you are feeling upset or angry, stop for a moment and try to think of one thing to be grateful for. I know this sounds simplistic, maybe even

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childish, and I'm not suggesting we ignore injustice and suffering. But what the scientists are finding is that we sometimes get caught in a negative feedback loop in which our anger or sadness about something just produces more anger and sadness as we dwell upon it and become obsessed with it. So the exercise is to think of one thing (or more) to be grateful for. And scientists say even the process of searching for that one thing, actually breaks the negative feedback loop.

I know it may sound silly, but I've tried it for a while and it's helping me. Maybe it will help you too, because in a very real sense, this is part of what happens in baptism. In the baptism of Jesus, God not only says who Jesus is, the Triune God also celebrates Jesus. Not only is there love within the being of God, there is also celebration and gratitude. And if that is true of the baptism of Jesus, then that is also true of how God feels about us, and how we are beckoned to feel about ourselves.

You see cannot run from who you are. But you don't have to. By God's celebration and love, you are who you are. Beautiful and grateful.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal