

Identity Crisis

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Isaiah 42:3; Luke 4:1, 2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The lines from Bishop John Shelby Spong that triggered the Lenten series for me are printed on the inside cover of your liturgy this morning. The lines caught my attention because they present Jesus Christ in most compelling fashion, the Jesus Christ that grips me and that moves me:

Look not at his divinity, but look, rather, at his freedom. Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power, but look, rather, at his infinite capacity to give himself away. Look not at the first century mythology that surrounds him, but look, rather, at his courage to be, his ability to live, the contagious quality of his love.

Jesus is interpreted by the Christian church in very exalted fashion. But, that is interpretation, the interpretation of an experience. More and more, we try to lay back the layers that the tradition has placed on him to see if we can find the face of that one, that Nazarene who was here, who was baptized at the hands of John the Baptist and, in that experience, sensed that he was claimed and called by God. Luke tells us that in the baptism he was praying and it was as though the heavens opened and the Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon him, and he heard a voice, "This is my beloved Son; You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." With a claim and a call that dramatic, one might think that that's all there was to it, simple, clear, not to be doubted, and sometimes, as the stories are written in the gospels, the exaggerated stories of his power, the first century's mythological framework in which we find him portrayed, it might seem as though there was little room for any question, any doubt on his part, and yet there is enough of that real Jesus that obtrudes through, even in the gospel portraits that are written after Easter and paint him in exultant colors - there's enough of that historical core that comes through that we can see that it was not so easy for Jesus. Jesus still had to determine who he was and the nature of the mission to which God was calling him, and that didn't come automatically.

It's rather interesting that in Luke and Matthew, who follow Mark, they all record the experience of the temptations, Mark just a brief reference, but Luke and Matthew, some expanded conversation with the devil in the wilderness after forty days of prayer and fasting, and it is not by coincidence that the evangelist placed that struggle, that temptation experience immediately after the claiming and the calling in his baptism, preceding his ministry, obviously trying to tell us that Jesus had to struggle to understand who he was and the nature of the work to which God had called him and for which God had claimed him.

Mythological? I would guess so. I don't meet the devil engaging me in conversation out on the street, and of course, I don't go into the wilderness where maybe I would meet him. It's an obvious creation of the evangelist in order to make a point. Not that we deny the reality of darkness, the reality of evil in the world. Not that all of the religions in the world have not recognized that hindrance to wholeness and to the mending of creation. But, nonetheless, this is obviously a creation of the evangelist in order to tell us that Jesus, in the light of the claiming and the calling of God and in the prelude to the ministry he would execute, had to figure out who he was and how he was to go about it.

The Gospel of John doesn't mention the temptation experience. Nonetheless, the Gospel of John does have John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John witnesses to the fact that he saw the Spirit of God fall out on Jesus. He cannot do anymore than he does to affirm this one, and so John the evangelist also ties in Jesus to the ministry of John the Baptist. But he doesn't tell us that John the Baptist baptized him, and he doesn't tell us about this wilderness temptation experience. What he does tell us in the early chapters of his gospel, I think, is a narrative form of what Luke and Matthew were trying to tell us.

It's interesting that the Gospel of John, which is different in its chronology and so much of its import from the other three gospels, presents Jesus witnessed to by John, pointed out by John, but then going to Galilee. He's in Cana of Galilee where he performs his first sign, changing the water into wine, and then already in the second chapter we have Jesus going down to the Passover in Jerusalem.

Now, if you read these gospels, you find that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus goes to Jerusalem just one time, and it's the last week of his life. But, in John, Jesus goes back and forth to Jerusalem, and early in his ministry, he goes to Passover in Jerusalem, and he comes to the temple and do you remember what he does? He's infuriated. He's filled with anger at what he sees - the whole temple establishment, everything that was going on there which he must have seen as a barricade to access to the grace of God rather than the instrumentality through which that grace is to be mediated. John tells us he made whips of cords, he overturned the moneychangers tables, and he made quite a scene. It was an angry scene, and, of course, people loved to have it so. I mean, this man has fire! This man has passion! And so, they come to him. Now, still in the second chapter of

John, we read that as they were coming to him, he realized it was because of what he had done, of the sign that he had perpetrated, and John says, "But Jesus wouldn't give himself to them because he knew what was in them. He didn't entrust himself to the multitude that came rushing on."

What was going on? I suspect that what John was trying to tell us was that, in the early phase of Jesus' ministry, he was very much in the mold of John the Baptist. Wouldn't that be natural? John baptized him, and in his baptism he senses his calling, and wouldn't it be expected that, having identified himself with that spiritual renewal movement at the end of the age as John presented it, that Jesus would have carried on very much with the voice and the manner of John the Baptist? John the Baptist was a fiery preacher of judgment and the wrath of God to come. I suspect that Jesus began in that mode, and at least the chronology of John's gospel places Jesus and the cleansing of the temple in the wake of his initial call and claiming as the manner in which he had determined he was to carry out that ministry. Then he saw the reaction, and the reaction he saw was the reaction of anger and hatred and violence.

Isn't it interesting what religious rhetoric can do? Is there any rhetoric in the world more volatile and explosive than religious rhetoric? And seeing that, it must have raised questions in Jesus' mind. Is this what I am to be about?

It's a little creative imagination, but I think I understand what was going on. In my earlier years, before I knew Jesus, I used to preach some angry sermons, and afterwards I didn't feel so good about it. Now, there's no question about the fact that you deserved it! But, leaving, I didn't feel good about it. I had gotten wrapped up in the rhetoric and I didn't like what I felt, and frankly, didn't like what it did to you.

Now, if stay with John's gospel for a minute, you'll find that Jesus carried on a ministry in Judea, down south of Jerusalem in the area of John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark and Luke don't tell you that. Only John tells you that he began a ministry with his disciples down the banks of the Jordan, in the vicinity where John had carried on his ministry and where Jesus himself had been baptized. And if you read in the end of the third chapter of John, you will find that the word got around that Jesus was drawing better than John. John was holding forth in the First Presbyterian Church, and now there's a Second Presbyterian Church down the line, and it's doing better. (It used to be a Reformed Church, but it's Presbyterian.) Now, they come to John and they say, "Hey, that fellow that started out with you is down there doing this thing, and the crowds are going to him." And then if you read a little further on, you'll find that when Jesus gets wind of this, he leaves. He says, "I'm out of here," because there was something about the competitive nature of that ministry that he knew was a violation of the very ministry he was carrying on. And we read that Jesus went to Galilee, and how did he go to Galilee? He went to Galilee through Samaria, and at Samaria, what does he do? He engages the woman at the well, which is quite an astounding

thing for him to do. And James and John, who feel the inhospitable attitude of the Samaritans, suggest to Jesus, "You know, maybe we ought to call down fire from heaven on these Samaritans." Very much in the old mode, eh? The Sons of Thunder, they were called. Damn them. Wipe them out! Ah, there's something down here in the visceral section of our being that responds to that. And Jesus said, "Stop. You don't know what spirit you are of."

And then he went to Galilee and carried on his Galilean ministry and do you remember what happened when John the Baptist was thrown into prison? He sent his disciples to Jesus in Galilee when he heard the ministry that Jesus was carrying on in Galilee and what was his question? "Are you the one? Or should I look for another?" Are you the one upon whom I had pinned my hopes for the future? Are you the one that I mentored and nurtured in this ministry? Are you the one who was to carry on the program of the kingdom of God when I lose my head?

It's really tough when you've mentored someone to have them turn away; when you have taught and nurtured and shaped and invested yourself, and then find them turning out to be quite other than the aspirations you had for them. I think that was behind John's question. And the answer to John's question would have to be, "Yes, and No. I am the one called and claimed by God, but no, not in the fashion in which you shaped me, John, because the fashion in which you shaped me is something that causes me to tremble. It flies in the face of what I'm sensing God to be and what God is calling me to be."

Was there another model? Sure there was. And if John was modeled after the prophet Malachi, then I think that Jesus in his own reflection, in his meditation, in his fasting and in his prayer, came rather to see the suffering servant as the paradigm for his ministry.

The suffering servant - there are four poems, four servant poems in Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55. We read one of them, Isaiah 42:

My servant, my chosen one in whom my spirit dwells. The bruised reed he will not crush. The dimly burning wick he will not snuff out. Not only will he not call down fire from heaven, but he will take that which is bruised and broken and nurture it and care for it and fan it into life.

I believe that Jesus, having sensed the claim and the call of God, and having begun in one direction was turned around in his heels, so that it was not John the Baptist who provided for him the model for his ministry, the ministry of condemnation and judgment and the wrath of God, not the announcement of the imminent wrath of God, but the announcement of the imminent breaking in of the grace of God, the kingdom of God, the reign of God. A message not of doom, but of good news; a message not of judgment, but of grace. That, I think, is what those temptation narratives in Luke and in Matthew, based on Mark's statement, were intending to tell us - that Jesus didn't come into this full blown, that Jesus

had to wrestle and struggle and fight his way through to a sense of who he was and the nature of that ministry to which he was called, that Jesus was not so cock sure.

Interestingly, Luke tells us that the devil left him for *a more opportune time*. In other words, it wasn't over. Indeed, it wasn't over. Look at the Garden of Gethsemane. "Let this cup pass from me." He didn't want to die. Look at the darkness of Calvary. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Did he mean that honestly, genuinely? I think he did. Might he not have expected, having come finally to determine who he had to be and how he had to be - might he not have expected, convinced that he was that he was the agent of God's incoming kingdom, might he not have expected, even at the last moment, that God would have done something, some dramatic move? I think so. And nothing happened. And he died in the darkness, forsaken, trusting, forsaken, trusting, doubting, wondering, clinging to God. Where else could he go?

The devil said, "Why don't you get it over with right at the beginning? Why don't you make God show God's hand? Why don't you get a demonstration, a public demonstration?"

Jesus knew that was not the way he was to go. He was to go by faith. He was to trust. He was to embody grace, and he was to trust, and that was the only option available if he would be true to what he sensed God was about.

Identity crisis. For us, too. Is grace still enough? Will we be doubly committed to being a place of grace? Will we dare follow Jesus so that, if it comes to standing in the face of religious establishment or political pressure or whatever else might be out there, we will stand as the embodiment of the grace of God where there is no exclusion? Will we dare to see Jesus as Jesus saw himself, as the servant of the Lord who was God's agent, in whom God was embodied? God still transcending, God still larger, God's embrace still broader?

Jesus did not see himself as God! Jesus knew himself claimed by God, the servant of God, the embodiment of God. That's where I see God; in the face of Jesus I see God. Paul said, "We've seen the light of the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus." John has him say in the fourth gospel, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." It's the human face of God. *That's* where I see God. I see through the face; I see through the ages, giving me the clue to God Who is beyond it, beyond him, beyond us all. In that beautiful, gracious, compassionate, open, human being, I see God. God is like that. That's how God is. And if that's how God is, in that human face, then I still will be able to find God in human faces - in yours, and yours, and yours. And I will know the truth of that biblical statement, *"The one who dwells in love, dwells in God and God dwells in that one."*

It was not easy for him to gain his sense of identity and to know the nature of his mission, but by God he made it! Thank God he made it, and thank God for human community full of grace where God can still be touched.

It's really quite simple, once you see it.

Christpower

Look at him!
Look not at his divinity,
but look, rather, at his freedom.
Look not at the exaggerated tales of his power,
but look, rather, at his infinite capacity
to give himself away.
Look not at the first-century mythology that surrounds him,
but look, rather at his courage to be,
his ability to live
the contagious quality of his love.
Stop your frantic search!
Be still and *know* that this is God:
this love,
this freedom,
this life,
this being;
and
When you are accepted,
accept yourself;
When you are forgiven,
forgive yourself;
When you are loved,
love yourself.
Grasp that Christ power
and
dare to be yourself!

John Shelby Spong, 1973