**Who Am I? Why Am I Here?**

June 22, 2025

Isaiah 65: 1-9

Psalm 22: 18-27

Galatians 3: 23-29

Luke 8: 26-39

In 1992, Ross Perot selected Navy Vice-Admiral James (Bond) Stockdale as his running mate in the race for the presidency as an independent candidate. In the vice-presidential debate against Al Gore and sitting-vice-president Dan Quayle, Vice-Admiral Stockdale began his opening statement with “Who am I? Why am I here?”. He was essentially unknown to the American public, so it seemed a good strategy to lend voice to what most Americans were likely already asking. In the end, however, the trappings of his life…a long and decorated career…distinguished military service…years as a prisoner of war…president of the Naval War College…did not translate to electoral success.

His questions, though, strike me as the exact questions we, as Christians, are called to ask ourselves. How we answer, how honestly we answer, and, crucially, whether we ask and answer at all, are fundamental in shaping the life each of us leads and the impact that life has on those around us.

Who am I?

Beyond the litany of relations we represent, the jobs we’ve held, our accomplishments…the facts that would most readily populate our biography…we are called to ask “who am I at my core?…what motivates me?…where do my sympathies lie?…what makes me me?

For Christians, it perhaps seems slightly ironic that, in order to move past our “self” and become one with Christ and one with each other, we must first focus on that very “self”. But, of course, as with any journey, we have to know where we are if our motion is to have any purpose and not just be “doing something” for the sake of “doing something”. Two thoughts:

If you recall, the parish discernment process we went through last year before calling Becki was a period of reflection, conversation, and self-assessment. The parish profile resulting from this process included not only Piedmont’s ‘biographical’ data but also revealed the more intrinsic nature of ‘who’ and, importantly, ‘why’ Piedmont is. No doubt, Becki went through her own period of self-examination following her time in seminary, to ready herself for the start of her formal ministry. Without those reviews, we would not have known that we were looking for an energetic, joy-sharing presence, and she would not have been able to see that she was a fit for the earnest, faith-filled congregation that we are.

Less formally, I have a distinct memory of playing ping pong in our basement with my son, Sam, when he was a teenager. Now, it wouldn’t have been our only discussion along these lines, but I remember talking with him during one session about the value of introspection…of taking the time to ask the questions we’re talking about today. I recall, though with less situational distinctness, similar conversations with our other son, Ben. Teenager-hood...and truth be told, childhood and adulthood as well, are crucial times in anyone’s development, and, based on the thoughtful young men that they have become, it seems evident that they took those discussions (and their mother’s unerring guidance) to heart.

With all of this looking inward, there is the danger of it simply becoming navel gazing with no other end than curiosity and self-interest. While those goals are fine as far as they go, God is looking for **more** for us and more **from** us. We are being called to explore the “Who am I?” question so that we can answer the “Why am I here?” question…so that we can live more fully and more intentionally into His plan for our lives and how our lives impact those with whom we intersect.

I feel quite certain that Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, would have answered very differently than his future self, Epistle-writer Paul. Eminently learned and respected (or perhaps more accurately, feared), Saul’s actions point to a heart unburdened by compassion…a psyche that reveled in persecuting followers of Christ. In Galatians chapter 1, Paul admits that “...I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”

Were he to ask these questions and answer truthfully, he likely would have noted his adherence to God’s law and pointed with pride to his faithfulness in upholding its strictures. That was who he was…at his core.

I’ll hark back to Pentecost a couple of weeks ago and add in a little French…persecution was his raison d’être…his reason for being.

With his conversion on the road to Damascus, however, his whole inner self was transformed. No longer was he motivated by blindly abiding by the Law, but rather his heart had been transformed…he had been captured by God’s love…he knew it and he confessed it. And, of course, he wrote…and wrote…and wrote…then wrote some more. In today’s letter to the Galatians, Paul paints the before and after pictures of Christ’s arrival in our lives…how we lose the societal markers that dictate so many of the opportunities & the challenges…markers that define so much of the connectedness & the detachment…markers that orient so much of the love & the hate…with which we are confronted every day.  He writes passionately in this passage and in other epistles about how, through faith, the barriers we erect and those erected by society fall away and we become united as the body of Christ…ready to act in His name and to shine His light in the world. It was, is, and will remain a liberating message…a message that has brought courage, hope, and faith to those yearning for clarity in their own lives and in the life of the church. Following his cathartic experience, Paul’s outlook...his writing...his message...all flowed from his realization that he had been changed...an acceptance that he was not who he used to be. His was a dramatic and monumental conversion, but imagine for a moment that he had not answered that call. Imagine that he ‘felt’ different but looked no deeper and perhaps simply stopped persecuting Christians, as opposed to asking himself “Why am I here?”…a question that led him to become chief proselytizer, encourager, and advocate for Christ. How different the world would be today.

In today’s Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, God speaks of what He has done to reach out to the people…that is to say, us…His eagerness to make Himself known to them…”I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said “Here I am, here I am.” to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;…”and He enumerates some of the many ways that they found to reject, ignore, and distance themselves from Him…saying ”…a people who provoke me to my face continually…who say “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.”

That disconnect…that gulf between God’s ever-present call to us and our all-too common deafness is central to the questions before us today. We live in a time when there is no shortage of ways to occupy ourselves…to keep from looking within...to do and to do and to do…a people in constant motion going nowhere.

And so…if we are diligent in our individual and collective lives...as a church...as a community...as a nation...and we do the often hard work of asking and answering who we are, where does that leave us? If today’s Gospel is any guide…and it is…it leaves us better prepared to be witnesses to the transformative power of Christ. Much like the pre-faith bondage Paul alludes to in his letter to the Galatians, the man possessed by demons in Luke’s account is overwhelmed by and at the mercy of that which consumes him…the forces that cloud his mind and control his actions. His possession echoes the unexamined life...a life subject to the whims of the world...to borrow from Shakespeare’s Macbeth, a life at risk of being “...full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. This man was powerless to live into God’s plan for his life until he had been freed...until he knew, through Jesus’ intervention, who he was. Like Paul, his life had been transformed, and with instruction from Jesus, his purpose became clear; Luke tells us “...he went away, proclaiming...how much Jesus had done for him.”

When we pause the busy-ness and distractions of the world long enough to ask “Who am I?, our answer comes not in a sterile vacuum or through the filter of our daily concerns but in harmony with God’s voice reminding us that, first…and last, we are His. and when we recognize and prioritize this, the answer to the second question becomes much easier to articulate and to follow. Should we choose to engage with ourselves, each of us will, of course, have our own inner conversation, and each of us will see the path to who we are lit with varying amounts of sun and shadow. Very often the act of looking itself will be tiring, or difficult, or murky, or maybe all three, but, in the end, it is essential. There are as many different ways to be called to be a member of the body of Christ and to understand our role in His kingdom as there are people in this world; the real effort and the real joy is making time to understand who we are and to find our own raison d’etre.

As encouragement on your journey of self-discovery, I’d like to close with this passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Romans 12:1-2 and 9-13

**“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

**Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the Saints, practice hospitality.”**

Amen