

Ephesians 1:1-2
(Exodus 3:11-15; John 15:16-17)
“Who Am I and Who Are You?”

Introduction

Who am I? There is no more basic question than this. Closely linked is the question, God, if you are there, who are you? John Calvin said that we cannot really ask the one without asking the other. Some see the question of personal identity as peculiarly western and modern, arguing that ancient people and people of the global east and south define themselves according to their people, their community, and not as individuals. But that simply extends the context of the question: Who are my people? Where is my true home? Where do I belong? Why am I here? Where am I from and where am I going?

A man of the ancient Middle East asked just such questions and recorded his own tremendous, life-transforming encounter with God, as we read in our first lesson. Moses was the son of an Israelite couple, but was raised within the Egyptian household of Pharaoh. His confusion of identity is a major theme in the opening chapters of Exodus. He had tried in his own strength to help his birth people, killing an Egyptian whom he saw beating an Israelite. But when the deed became known, he fled to the backside of the desert, where he married, raised a family, tended sheep for his father-in-law, all the while passing his years far from the people of his birth. When at last, as an old man, he encountered the Lord, God told him that he was sending Moses back to Egypt to rescue his people. Moses response was to ask the two questions that had plagued him all his life: Who am I? and Who are you?

We all have some sense of self, even if we are not self-reflective. Some of us live tragically insecure lives because we were mistreated as children, perhaps even physically abused, or called stupid or weak or strange. Others of us think that we deserve every good thing that life has because we were pampered and told that we were wonderful, beautiful, smart, exceptional. We hardly know what to think when we fail or are rejected. More of us, I suspect, are either plagued by things that we have done in the past, poor choices that we fear may have set us an unalterable course toward mediocrity or failure, or we find ourselves overwhelmed by present circumstances that we fear will define us as victims.

But the Bible calls us to an entirely and radically new way of thinking of ourselves, one that invites an honest assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, victories and defeats. The apostle Paul, in the opening greeting of the Ephesians letter, addresses this question of identity – both his identity and that of his readers – not in terms of a theological discussion, but simply through his use of language that reflects this refreshingly new way of understanding who we are, if we are in Christ Jesus. I hope that these verses will both encourage and challenge you this morning.

Body

1. Paul tells us who he really is (1:1a).

He does not let his past failures define him (3:8):

Paul was always open about his past. He had been a serious young rabbi who sought to please God by studying *Torah* as interpreted by the leading rabbinical scholars of his day, and who sought to enforce the command of Moses that anyone who believed or taught another message was to be stopped by whatever means necessary.

So Paul was an early persecutor of the church, watching with approval the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Paul was, in fact, on his way to Damascus to arrest and imprison followers of Jesus when he had his overwhelming encounter with the risen Christ that changed him from Christ's greatest enemy to his greatest advocate. And Paul told that story wherever he went as an illustration of God's grace even toward someone like Paul. But he never let his past define him or rob him of his joy.

He does not let his present circumstances define him (3:1; 4:1):

Paul says twice that he is writing this letter from prison, suffering imprisonment because of his ministry to the Gentiles. It is not the only letter in the New Testament that Paul wrote from prison, yet Paul's prison letters are among his most joyfully confident writings.

Of course, Paul would have preferred to be free, on the road, pursuing ministry. Yet he let nothing stop him from being what Christ had called him to be and from doing what Christ had called him to do. So he writes from prison, and through his letter he teaches the gospel of Christ and continues to pursue his mission. While his present circumstances clearly affect him, he does not permit them to define him.

He takes his identity from what God has called him to be and do:

"An apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." He was once an enemy of Messiah Jesus. But that did not disqualify him from God's grace. God specializes in turning enemies into friends, even into adopted children, joint heirs with Jesus. Paul is a prisoner. But that cannot stop him from pursuing his calling. He has been sent with a message of life to a dying world, and as long as he can find a way to proclaim that message, he will do so, not out of drudging duty, but with joy.

He no longer defines himself as he once did, by his tribe or his education or by the things that he had done and achieved, not even by his sufferings for the Gospel. His identity is as a man-in-Christ, called by the grace of the Lord to proclaim to the world, to Jew and Gentile alike, that the covenant of grace is open to all through the life, death and victory of God's Messiah, Jesus, and that those who are in Christ have the promise that one day God will make all things new in the new Creation.

2. Paul tells us who we really are (1:1b).

We are saints

Sadly, this word has been terribly misused over the millennia of Christian history to designate those considered a special class of super Christians. But in the Bible, all of God's people are called "saints" because it refers, not to what we have done for God, but to what God has done for us. The word has two aspects: it means that we have been set apart for God's purposes. We don't set ourselves apart, but God sets us apart, that through us he might fulfill his purposes for humanity, and through us might call people to himself. It also includes the idea of his having cleansed us for this purpose. In both senses, it is not the mark of those who have lived extraordinary lives, but of those who have known extraordinary grace.

So being a saint in this sense is not a reason for pride but for gratitude, and it should cause us to consider that God has set us apart for more than church attendance, more than Bible study and prayer. Those things are to help us grow into the people God has called us to be. But he wants us in the world as his representatives, showing and telling the great good news that Jesus has come in order to reconcile us to God and to one another, and to restore all things to their original purpose of bringing him glory and his people joy.

Being his chosen and set apart people is not to be celebrated by cutting ourselves off from the world around us, but rather by carrying God's transforming presence into the places where he is not yet known and honored, even into the darkest places where he wants his grace and glory to shine. So God wants us to be in every place and in every kind of work and situation, making him present and real, "giving him skin," so that the world may know the One who loves them and calls them home through Christ.

We are faithful

To that end, Paul reminds us that God's intent is that we be faithful, in both senses of the word. We are to be those who faithfully trust in Jesus and those who faithfully follow him. Faith, in Scripture, is more than simply believing something to be true. It means that we embrace that truth and begin to build

our lives upon it. What we most believe shapes and molds us, and so it must come out in what we say and do.

That is one reason why Jesus said, in his description of the judgment of the nations (in Matthew 25), that the basis of judgment will be, not what we say or profess to believe, but what we do. We are justified in this present time by what we believe. But in the day of the Lord, we will be judged by whether or not we truly believed what we professed, as demonstrated by our lives.

We are in Christ

This kind of radical life transformation is only possible because, in redeeming us, the Lord joins us to Christ. As I hope to show next week, this grand reality of our union with Christ is at the heart of Paul's message, and should be at the heart of our identity. We are not merely chosen or adopted or regenerated or forgiven or justified or being sanctified or living in the hope of one day being glorified. All of that is only because of one great truth: We are united to Christ by his Spirit, who lives in us from the moment of our rebirth in Christ Jesus.

This will be the theme of the verses that immediately follow our text, so I will leave this great theme for next week. Suffice it to say that, for the disciple of Christ, our union with Christ is at the very heart of our self-understanding and identity.

3. Paul tells us what is ours in Christ (1:2).

Grace

The Greek word *charis* means gift, and Paul uses it to describe all of God's gifts to his children, especially the gift of our union with Christ, our adoption into his family and the wonder of our vocation as those through whom God aims to redeem the nations that are now in rebellion against him. The redeemed cosmos is our destiny, and we are called to people it with a new humanity, called from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from alienation to loving intimacy, all through the grace of God.

Peace

Peace is the result of God's grace. Behind the Greek word Paul uses is the comprehensive Hebrew word *shalom*. It describes a situation where all things are made right, where we are reconciled to God and to one another, as well as to the world around us. It is what we have longed for all our lives, what we have sought in so many dysfunctional ways, and what God alone can give. It is not merely future. It begins now for those in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

Do you yet know this grace and peace promised to God's children? Have you yet tasted and seen the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord? In the midst of a world badly broken – sometimes exquisitely beautiful, other times excruciatingly painful – yet already redeemed, do you know the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living? If you are in Christ, all this is already yours, not merely in the future, but now.

So let the apostle speak this good word to your heart and mind this morning: In Christ, you are not defined by your failures of the past or by your present circumstances, but by what the Lord has given you: grace that is greater than all your sin and peace in every circumstance of life. You have been set apart as his faithful child, and loved even as he loves his Son, in whom all things are yours.

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