

“I Am, You Are, We Are”

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Mark 1:1-11, Luke 4:1-15, John 1: 43-51

‘In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. John 1:1

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to know Jesus better, for if we can do that,

we will know you better– and know ourselves better in the process.

Amen

The Apostles’ Creed tells us that Jesus Christ was

‘Born of the Virgin Mary; Suffered under Pontius Pilate’ –

but what happened in between?

Who was – and who is, Jesus Christ?

The Biblical stories you heard today describe the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry
and how his identity was formed through trial and rejoicing.

He didn’t just show up one day, teaching lovely platitudes as wisdom for the ages,

but he emerged from the waters of his baptism at the River Jordan,

just like dry land emerged from the watery chaos at Creation.

He was tested in the desert wilderness and who he was came forth

like gold out of a refining fire.

The Logos, the Word, the Name of God was already written into him

as the genetic code of his DNA.

Jesus emerged and evolved to become the Son of God and Son of Man...

In some communities of our society,

‘evolution’ is still a troubling issue, whether or not to teach it in their schools.

Some people fear that ‘evolution’ disputes the literal Word of God –

specifically, the Creation narratives of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

In Genesis, it is written that in seven days,

God created our world – along with the whole Universe.

and filled the firmaments of sea and sky and field

with all the living creatures.

On the 6th day, God created humankind –

‘...God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;

male and female, he created them.’

Yet in all our wild diversity of cultures, ages, tongues, and races,

how could we all be in the image of God?

In the book of Exodus, Moses was a shepherd tending a flock in the Sinai desert,

when one day he sees a bush, burning all by itself.

He has a personal spiritual experience of encountering God –

recorded in scripture for generations ever since.

Willard, p.2

When Moses asks by what name he shall tell others about God, he is told,
“Tell them, ‘I Am’ has sent you.”

That is the one thing all human beings have in common with each other
and with God – all of us can say, “I am...”, “I am somebody!”

I come from a church tradition that says,

“Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey,
you are welcome here.”

The United Church of Christ is a ‘progressive’ church
with a number of historical ‘firsts’:

We are the first church to ordain women in modern times;

We are the first church to ordain African-Americans;

We are the first church to ordain gay people.

We are a church that is ‘open and affirming’ of all human beings
in the wild diversity of Creation and in the image of our Creator.

In the first of the three Gospel lessons for today,

Jesus’ identity is affirmed as God’s Son at his baptism.

He receives a vision of the firmament of the sky opening up to heaven and
the Spirit in the likeness of a beautiful dove descending to caress his face,
like the Holy Spirit at Creation hovering over the face of the deep.

Then, Jesus hears, “I love you”, “I’m proud of you”, “You are accepted” –
words that any of us would hope to hear from our loved ones.

Jesus rises from the waters of his baptism knowing who he is,
but now he must go through a baptism of fire...

The next generation is growing up with its own set of challenges.

As if just getting through school wasn’t tough enough,

bullying is now a widespread concern,

targeting young people as individuals or who are part of specific groups.

In some instances, alliances are forming to help schools deal with this issue
and when they do, it is a great step forward for communities
even just to begin talking about the problem of bullying.

In the second Gospel lesson about the wilderness of temptation,

Jesus’ identity as the Son of God was questioned

by Satan – whose name literally means ‘enemy’.

‘If you are the Son of God...?’ “If you are who you say you are...?”

It is the voice of our own worst enemy – which is often our own voice,
echoing the world’s contempt for what it doesn’t understand.

Willard, p.3

Three times, Jesus is challenged and twice he replies,
‘It is written...’, ‘It is written...’, quoting scripture,
but the third time Jesus speaks for himself –
‘It is said, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God”.’

What he said can be found in Deuteronomy chapter 6,
but the sense of it is this:

“Stop tempting me! Stop tempting the One Who is your God!”
Jesus spoke for himself – and that is what that middle-schooler did!
Isn’t that something we want all our children to learn and do?
To speak the truth. To find their own voice –
and not just parrot the world’s prejudices...

Perhaps the most compelling testimony I have heard about bullying
was when an educator told of a boy who came home
to give his mother his report card with all A’s and B’s.
But when it was time for supper, he didn’t come down from his room –
because he had taken his life...
He had been constantly called ‘gay’ – and he didn’t even know what that meant.
His mother had been reporting this harassment to school administrators,
but they did nothing – and now this boy is dead.

Jesus knew all about what it was like to be bullied as a scapegoat
long before Gethsemane and Calvary.
Jesus was a Galilean Jew, who grew up in Nazareth –
but Nazareth was a Samaritan town.
Now, Samaritans were generally treated with contempt
by the Jewish majority of Galilee.
Jesus was of the majority culture, but lived in a minority neighborhood.
His father was a carpenter – meaning his family was working class poor,
and besides that, because of the unusual circumstances of his birth,
he very likely grew up with the stigma of being illegitimate.
Jesus knew what it was like to be bullied.

In the third Gospel lesson, Nathaniel’s question is especially harsh –
‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’
In the temptations, Jesus’ identity was challenged,
but now it is *where he comes from* that is subject to ridicule.
When they first meet, Jesus gives it right back to Nathaniel
about being an ‘Israelite’ who could be trusted –
since historically, the northern Israelites broke away
from southern Judah which eventually caused all of Israel
to be conquered and sent into exile.

Willard, p.4

When Nathaniel snaps back, saying, “How would you know me?”,
Jesus says, ‘I saw you under the fig tree.’

Apparently this was a spiritual experience for Nathaniel –
like the ‘burning bush’ for Moses.

Though we don’t know what epiphany Nathaniel may have had –
being ‘under the fig tree’ – is a reference to national prosperity.

Nathaniel answers him,

‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’
which is another way of saying, “You are one of us!”
echoing God’s affirmation of Jesus:

“You are loved, I am proud of you. You are accepted.”

Therefore, in these three texts, we see that Jesus’ identity – as divine and human,
emerged and evolved in the midst of trial and rejoicing.

Isn’t that the way it is for any of us?

Don’t we all have to prove ourselves in this world?

But shouldn’t we expect that process to be fair for everybody,
instead of a rigged game for some to fail just because of who they are?

Let each of us claim,

“I am, you are, we are loved and accepted by God.”

What being ‘open and affirming’ means is

to recognize that you are accepted and loved by God for who you already are –
giving up only what is hurtful and false.

It means we are to help other people find that for themselves, too –
to be themselves.

It means for all of us to speak from the heart – each of us, each of you,
to be who you’re going to be.

Jesus’ life was a parable for us all to follow – to speak for ourselves, to be ourselves,
no matter who we are, or where we are, on our life’s journey.

Amen