

WHO ARE WE BECOMING?

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22

What a moment this is for Jesus. Picture it in your mind. He is standing in the water with his cousin John, both of them suddenly realizing how the years have passed, yet their sights are fixed firmly on the future. A ministry that would immediately mark itself as a vocation that carpentry was not for him. Those of you who joined this church when Jon Walton was here know that he always said at the classes for new members, “and Jesus hung his apron on the hook by the door in his dad’s shop one day and never went back.” This moment is that moment of becoming something different than a carpenter. Standing in the Jordan River there is no turning back to wood and tools, to sawdust and boards. It is not clear at all that the crowds understand that he is the one about whom John speaks. We do, of course, standing at the waters’ edge, we know who Jesus is becoming. We inevitably read the gospels backwards. We know the end of the story, we know who he becomes. We crowd out those gathered on the shore with their innocence and naïveté, their poor hearing of voices from heaven. We see this private moment for all it is, the declaration of the incarnation we have been praying for and waiting for and celebrating for these last weeks of Advent and Christmas.

Depending on our own theological underpinnings, we each make our own determination about how much Jesus knew of this moment. Some of us believe, no doubt, that it was this moment that the whole rest of his life and death flashes before his eyes. Some of us believe that he only glimpsed for a moment the next step on the path, that much more would be revealed to him in the coming weeks and months. He walked and healed and taught and shared meals with people, and he learned each day about what this moment of incarnation was really all about. Of course, some of us are both/and people. We believe he both knew where this moment was taking him, and he also grew into who he was becoming along the way.

If we pause and think about it, we know these kinds of moments in our own lives. We all look back at moments that changed everything, and how much and how little we knew in those moments. In as much as we stand on the banks of the Jordan River and wonder who Jesus is becoming, we wonder the same for ourselves. Who are we becoming in these days? Like the crowd around us that day, who is wondering what will become of their world, we are wondering the same. Perhaps like Jesus, we are wondering for our own vocation, our own lives. Who are we becoming? The moments that shape us can be easy to miss. They do not always come with a voice from heaven or with witnesses to attest to what was seen and heard.

Like the crowds around John and Jesus that day, we are left standing on the shore, waiting, wondering if perhaps we missed it. Jesus’ baptism doesn’t come with a thunderstorm, or a great wind, or a fire to which John alludes. In fact, this moment appears to come with everyone else, like everyone else, and the revelatory moment comes in prayer, after the baptism, where Jesus hears God’s voice of blessing. Who he is becoming is not yet visible.

How often that is the case. Who we are becoming as a people, as a nation, as a congregation, as a person is not always visible, not even among those closest to us. The work of becoming is hard work and there are plenty of people around us who are wanting to shape and guide that process. Especially in truly troubled times, the expectations are high. But expectations do not help with the clarity of becoming.

The work of becoming is not easy work, and it seems most of the time that we feel like it is a destination of sorts, we'll know when we get there we have really become something. Becoming is so much different than that gradual line of growth that I anticipated in my youth, yet I found myself drawn to advice about this question to someone whose writing had a huge influence on the vocational journey of my youth, Paul Tillich.

If you're not familiar with Paul Tillich, he was born in Germany and began his career teaching there. In 1933, Reinhold Niebuhr was visiting Germany and invited Tillich to join him on the faculty at Union Theological Seminary here in New York City. Tillich had just been dismissed as a faculty member at the University of Frankfurt, because of his lack of alignment with Adolf Hitler and his party. Tillich was the kind of anomaly as a thinker that we long for today. He defied and still defies clear categorization. His theology spoke brilliantly to progressive education and theology that was redefining its own voice as the post-Enlightenment surge in higher education, the emergence of the field of psychology and the theological challenges of the world being at war. Tillich also spoke to the rising theologians of neo-orthodoxy that would come to be THE prominent voices in Protestant theology in the 20th century, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr...

It was a little volume that Tillich wrote in 1952, based on his Terry Lectures at Yale University, called, *The Courage to Be*. I read this book in college and it had an immeasurable influence on me. It's one of those books that I remember where I was when I was reading it – you know the kind of moment I mean, when even at the time, you know something is so profound it is changing you? I read *The Courage to Be* on a bench down by the river in a park near my college. It was late spring, I have no idea in which of my religion classes it was assigned. When I pulled it off the shelf this week, a small pressed flower fell out of its pages, likely from that river bank all those years ago. I remember so little of Tillich's words or even his ideas, but I remember quite well the feeling I had while reading him all those years ago – a feeling that, even though I didn't understand all of his writing, that he was speaking to something deep within me with a resonance I had not felt before.

I imagine that's a bit of what Jesus felt on the shores of the Jordan River all those years ago as well. I'm not sure he fully understood in that moment what those words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" meant, any more than we reflect back and understand how certain words or conversations may be imprinting us for becoming. In the table of contents for *The Courage to Be*, Tillich outlines each chapter in wonderful detail. The last three sections of the book focus on these aspects of becoming – Courage and Participation (The Courage to BE as a Part), Courage and Individualization (The Courage to Be as Oneself) and Courage and Transcendence (The Courage to Accept Acceptance). These categories capture the nuance of who Jesus is becoming in this moment of baptism, and who we, in this moment in history, remembering his baptism and our own, are becoming.

We talk frequently about how the world is troubled right now. We are fearful for where things are going and there seems to be a moral and intellectual abyss that threatens and

indeed oppresses large groups of people. We are indeed in “crisis of heart and soul,” but there is little agreement on not only how to proceed but which aspects of our world are the crisis. We wake up in the morning and go to bed at night with fear swirling around us. Fear of violence. Anxiety about our work. Fear of uncertainty. Fear of the stranger. Fear of violence. Anxiety about not being able to maintain our responsibilities. Fear of addition. Anxiety about our limitations. Fear of being unjust. Who are we becoming?

Many of us are longing for in our becoming a new language that can provide some common principles on which we moor ourselves to in the pitch of these fears and anxieties. It may be time to conjure up and reclaim some good old theological language, like grace, forgiveness and the courage to be. Tillich suggests that, “without the anticipating fear and the compelling anxiety no finite being would be able to exist. Courage, in this view, is the readiness to take upon oneself negatives, anticipated by fear, for the sake of a fuller positivity.” (79). Tillich suggests that our fear is actually a positive thing, it wakes us up to knowing who we are NOT. Our fears do not define us, they remind us of who we are not.

For Tillich, the courage to be is a something which understands limits, and in that way pushes us further into who we are becoming. Tillich describes in his own time a world in which people cannot tolerate meaningless, and he is asserting that meaninglessness is actually a part of us all. Our fears are simply the limitations of our becoming.

The things we did not choose, the paths we did not follow, and naming those things allows us to live with more vitality, more courageously into our being. In our becoming, we need ways to transcend the self, to be fully ourselves and to be part of something beyond ourselves. Like those categories we discussed earlier that Jesus was thinking about on the bank of the Jordan River, it draws us back to the courage to accept acceptance.

We are all in a moment of becoming. Like Jesus standing in that moment, knowing what he is becoming and yet not fully understanding what he is becoming, we stand with him. We have been in a moment like this before. We know and yet do not fully know. We must not be frightened by our limitations, but allow for our limitations, believing that the small part we offer the world makes a significant difference. We accept our fears, but we are not becoming them. With the courage to be, we can become what our fears are not. What we need for the next moments is not just courage, but the courage to be, knowing that if we are willing, we are becoming a people who are beloved and accompanied.