

"Who Are You?"

January 24, 2016

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

Isaiah 61:1-11

Luke 4:14-21

*Who are you?* Do you ever ask get asked that question? I imagine we all do, from time to time. Perhaps the questioner doesn't ask it quite like that – "Who are you?" Instead, they might say something like, "I'm sorry, I don't remember if we've met. I'm Jane." Then, you get the chance to fill them in on who you are, but how do you do that? Just *how* do you answer a question like "who are you?" I suppose the answer is usually going to be something like, "I'm Eric Corbin." If we feel like going further, we might add, "I'm husband to Kristi and father to three children and I'm the associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Champaign." We might fill them in on more details, sometimes including who our family of origin is. In the south, at least, people really seem to want to know who our "people" are. My previous pastorate, though it was not in the same church I was raised in, was in the town in which I grew up, so many of the people there knew my mother, others knew my father, several knew my grandmother and other family members. So, if pressed for further information when asked "who are you," I would sometimes give those family members' names and how we're related. But that really doesn't get to the core of the question of "who are you?" Really, that answer starts out the same for each of us, "I am a child of God." The rest of the answer differs for each of us, though, and it can change for us over time. The truth is that we often cannot really answer the question of "who are you" because we haven't taken the time to find that answer, though we should. Jesus gives us a great example of knowing who He was. Jesus knew who He was and what He was called to do.

In those days, there was not really a professional clergy, at least not how we think of it here. The leader of the synagogue would invite any appropriate person to read the scriptures and comment on them. Luke tells us that it was Jesus' custom to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He had been traveling around, teaching in synagogues in other towns, but now He was back in Nazareth, where He grew up. So maybe they invited Jesus to speak just to see what the local boy could do. Luke tells us that Jesus was being praised by everyone as He taught in the synagogues, so maybe His fame was beginning to spread and the leaders of the synagogue in Nazareth were truly interested in what He would say. For whatever reason, on this particular Sabbath day, Jesus was invited to read and comment on the Scriptures. When He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, He unrolled it and found the passage He wanted to read. Jesus read about good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.

In the "Mission Impossible" television show and movies, the main character receives some communication of the mission that is needed and then it is summed up by saying "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." Jesus found His mission in the scroll of Isaiah. This was what He was sent here to do. It was what He was to be about in His life and ministry.

So Jesus read this passage from Isaiah and then He sat down. In those days, the scripture was read while standing, but the sermon based on the text was given while sitting. And so, Jesus sat down and the people were waiting to hear what Jesus would say. Luke tells us that “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him.” They were waiting for Him to preach. But instead of expounding on the passage from Isaiah, instead of speaking about the meaning of the text, Jesus stuns them with a one-liner: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And that’s where the lectionary ends this Sunday’s reading. Next week, the lectionary picks up where it left off today – with the reaction from those gathered. For now, we are left with that one-liner – “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Or, as *The Message* paraphrase has it, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.” The religious officials had invited this up-and-coming preacher to speak in the synagogue and He breaks the rules – He doesn’t say what they expect Him to say. Instead, this strange line, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What did Jesus mean by this? With a text that describes bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor, we can see something of a mission statement for Jesus’ ministry. These are much of the essence of what He would be doing over the next three years, so we can see why He would pick this passage. But why didn’t He say, “All right, people, this is what we’re gonna do. Let’s all get to work on doing these things I just read from Isaiah”? Instead, He said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Rather dramatic, isn’t it? Why didn’t He just tell everyone to roll up their sleeves and get to work?

Well, maybe Jesus didn’t just tell everyone to get to work on that agenda because that leaves out one very important detail – through whose power will we be doing these actions? The text from Isaiah was a prophecy about the future Messiah and Jesus was letting them know that it was no longer *future*. Jesus was the promised Messiah and the One *through whom* they would be bringing good news, releasing captives, recovering sight, and freeing the oppressed. When we go forth in working on this mission that Jesus outlined, we are doing so in the name and power of our Messiah. Whatever we do, we do so in the name of Jesus, so we probably should try our best to do what *He* chose to do on this earth.

It is also important to note that the first word that Jesus speaks aloud in Luke – other than reading the scripture – is the word “Today.” *Today*. There is a tendency among many in the Christian faith to only be looking ahead to the afterlife, but the kingdom of God is not just a future event. Jesus Christ proclaimed the beginning of the kingdom of God here *on earth*. He said to them “Today” and He set out to work on the mission laid out for Him. It is *our* task to take up that mission for ourselves, to follow in the footsteps of Christ, to bring good news to the poor, to work toward a just society in which there aren’t so many poor people, to work for the release of those unjustly imprisoned, to help those who are captive to all manner of masters become free, to help those who are spiritually blind to see, maybe even to help those who are *physically* blind to see, to work for the freedom of the oppressed, no matter who the oppressor. Can we say to those in need in our community and in our world that this passage from Isaiah is fulfilled in their hearing? Can we say to them “today”? Can we back up our words with actual deeds of love of mercy?

Jesus said to them “I know who I am. This is what I am here to do.” And He set about doing it. Today, do you know who you are? Do we as this particular part of the body of Christ known as First Presbyterian Church of Champaign know who we are?

Yogi Berra, the famous baseball player, was known for his particular use of the English language. He had a certain way with words and His “Yogisms” have been quoted widely, including in many a sermon. One of the best is this one: “If you don’t know where you’re going, you might wind up someplace else.” Jesus proclaimed to those in his hometown synagogue that He knew who He was and He knew where He was going. And Luke gives us something of an idea *how* He knew. The first verse we read from Luke today says “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.” This passage immediately follows Luke’s telling of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Luke tells us the same thing about Jesus when He went out into the wilderness. Luke says, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness...” And *that* passage immediately follows the baptism of Jesus, where the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. So, where does Jesus’ sense of identity, of calling, come from? Jesus was *filled with the power of the Spirit*. That same Spirit is available to each of us. That Spirit claims us all and empowers us all to live and serve others through the ministries that we are to be about in our earthly lives. We too can be filled with the power of the Spirit and that Spirit will lead us, through study of the scriptures and time spent in prayer and worship and fellowship, to follow Jesus in ministry. That Spirit may lead some of us on journeys to faraway places. But that Spirit just as often leads us to acts of mercy and justice and love *right here* in the places where we live. *Wherever we go*, we are to reach out in love and *action* to those who are poor and oppressed, blind and captive, sharing with them the joyous Good news of Jesus, the Messiah, who can restore their sight and set them free.

Dr. Delmer Chilton, a friend who is a Lutheran pastor in North Carolina, tells of a church sign which said “WE CARE FOR YOU!” in big letters. Underneath, in small print, it said, “Sundays, 10 am only.” Now, I imagine that smaller print was referring to the time of their worship service, but the two lines in juxtaposition does make one wonder. We are called to care for others, all of the time, not just on Sunday mornings at 10, or whichever hour we worship. We care for others in many ways, through our extensive Missions program, through partnerships with local agencies which work to meet the needs of people in our community, through English as a Second Language classes, through Mission Possible trips, through our Amateur Preachers program, through our Transportation Ministry, through visiting those who are sick or homebound or in care facilities, through volunteering to teach Sunday School or work with the Youth Group, through participation in the ministries of Presbyterian Women, through serving as an elder or deacon, through welcoming immigrants, through our relationship with Luyano Presbyterian Church in Cuba, through our partnership with the Sangala Hill Girls’ School in Pakistan, through members traveling near and far to assist others with wells or disaster relief, or through our reaching outward and inward to God’s children in need, in a variety of ways. Yes, we are caring for others in many ways today. However, there is always a need for others to join in the acts of caring, so you are invited to prayerfully consider where you feel led to join in these ministries of caring. We are all called to join in with Jesus in fulfilling that passage from Isaiah, in serving the world, in showing others the love of our God.

So, who are you? I hope that each of us can answer, "I am a child of God, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit." And then I hope that we will follow the leading of that same Spirit, to paths of service and ministry, wherever we may go. Amen.