

"Who Are You?"

Psalm 46: 1-3, 8-11; Mark 1:4-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 11, 2015 – Baptism of the Lord – Rev. Ronald Botts

The writer Carl Sandburg spent many years researching the life of Abraham Lincoln and then several more years putting the extensive biography together. By this effort he became one of the foremost experts on our 14th President. When the work was published he was asked by a reporter what his next project would be. A little surprised by the question, he answered: "I think now I'd like to find out who this **Sandburg** fellow really is."

A strange thing to say? Maybe it was just something unusual to admit. Carl Sandburg probably knew as much about Lincoln as anyone could. This eminent writer had truly entered into the mind and soul of his subject and was closer to him than a brother. He could have predicted how Abe would have responded in any number of theoretical situations.

So when Sandburg admitted he knew Lincoln even better than himself, he was candidly true. His knowledge of himself as a person was fragmented and not cohesive in the way he knew the man from Illinois. Sandburg's own life was full of secrets he kept even from himself. There were hidden disappointments and dark sins that never surfaced in the light of day. In other words, he was like most of us.

"Who am I?" he asked. When he queried himself, however, it wasn't just personally that he raised the question. I think the poet/biographer raised it for all of us. He gave voice to one of the strangest realities of being human—our uncertainty of self-identity.

The scriptures today help us to look at this question. Psalm 46 is a hymn of praise to God. It expresses an assurance that the Lord's presence in life is constant, no matter what today or tomorrow might bring. It tells us that God's sovereignty is greater than humanity's struggling attempts to exert ultimate control.

The Psalmist writes: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea... Come, behold the works of the Lord... He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire."

God can do all these things because of who God is. We are no match for the Lord, though sometimes we like think we are. Even our weapons of destruction are nothing in comparison to God's power. Our rocket launchers, our SCUD missiles our Stealth bombers may as well be the bow and the spear that lie broken and scattered. We can't even control the weather.

The Psalmist continues and summarizes his thoughts with these words: "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." There is no ambiguity here. If we raise our eyes to the heavens and ask, "Who is the one who gives shape to life?" then the answer will be "I. I am God." Who else would it be? The Lord's identity is sure and secure.

In our reading from Mark we find John baptizing by the River Jordan. After watching for a while Jesus comes forward to be baptized himself. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opening up and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. He heard a voice come from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." At least from this point Jesus' identity is sure and secure. He is God's chosen, the Messiah for all people in all time.

Later Christ asks Peter how he regards him. The disciple affirms Jesus' self-understanding when he answers, "You are the Messiah of God." Peter's reply then becomes the answer that all of us can give—Jesus is the Chosen One awaited, and now come. In each generation this question is asked again, and every time it is answered with the same assurance that goes all the way back to those who first followed him.

When Peter responded that the one before him was indeed the promised Messiah, Jesus did not deny the title. He understood that in the fullness of time all would come to recognize him.

Unlike Jesus, most of us don't know ourselves at all well. On the surface, sure, we know a lot about the one who stares back at us in the mirror. We know much about that individual's traits, preferences, and desires. We understand what pleases or displeases this person. We realize what raises fears or brings joy. Sometimes, however, that is about all we do know of the inner self that wears this familiar body. In some ways we're a stranger even to ourselves.

Pablo Casals, the noted cellist, was both a musician and a deeply spiritual being. He once made this observation on life: "Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that was never before and never will be again. And what do we teach our children in school? We teach that two and two make four and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are?"

"We should say to each of them: 'Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique, In all the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been a child like you. And look at your body. What a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, you singers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you than harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must cherish one another. You must work—we all must work—to make this world worthy of its children.'"

What a remarkable insight, but really it's nothing more than the Gospel. Over and over Jesus calls us to our authentic selves. He tells us that we can only truly give ourselves when we know what it is we have to give. We must first look inside ourselves to understand what we can offer as his disciple.

Casals appraises our modern Western education rightly when he says we are more geared to presenting facts than we are to preparing our children for their relationship and responsibilities to others. Surely anything as important as this has an important place in the school curriculum.

Moreover, if this applies to public education, it certainly needs to be part of what we—as a faith community— teach our children about living. Do we help them to realize the singular gifts they have and then encourage their development? Do we bring our children to

understand that the marvel of another of God's creatures is sacred life that should be honored and respected? Do we let them know that it is working together, and not in isolation, that will more likely bring greater results to the challenges of living today?

What applies to our children also applies to ourselves, and to our uniqueness and value and that of all people. Currently there is a growing movement affirming "black lives matter" and rightly so. Sometimes the obvious needs to be said lest it be forgotten and overlooked. But then—in like manner—we should also affirm that Native American lives matter, and Asian lives matter, and Hispanic lives matter. In fact, **all** lives matter despite the superficial differences that tend to separate us.

Our faith teaches us that to find who we are, to find our place in life, we must first experience it in relation to the one who said to "Be still, and know that I am God." It is to discover its fullness then through the one who told us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

When you know who you are, then you better discover God's special gifts in you. When you know who you are, you are more ready to share yourself for the good of the world.