

Sermon on Mark 8:31-38 by Jon Haug

Who are you? That can be a simple question on one level. Or quite a deep one if taken a different way.

First of all if you were asked who are you, you might simply answer your name. But even that might not be simple. Take for instance Abram and Sarai. For ninety-nine years they had been known to themselves and others as just that: Abram and Sarai. As the story goes their marriage did not bear them a child the way they had hoped. Abram had a child with Hagar named Ishmael, but now in their nineties they are promised by God that Sarai will bear a child. We know she laughs at the crazy news. And God ushers in new names for them: Abraham and Sarah. I have to imagine at times they had identity confusion. I imagine they slipped as they called each other what they had for decades of marriage, or as others that knew them still called them by their previous names.

Or take for instance anyone who has dealt with identity theft. You may know someone or been through this yourself and the countless hours on the phone, dealing with paperwork, banks, creditors, all to try to recover and prove one's identity.

Or what about the person who finds out late in life that they were adopted. They can experience a time of feeling that they were not who they thought they were. Or someone who goes through gender reassignment surgeries. They can finally begin to feel like who they always were and often may select a new name.

There are different kinds of identity challenges and they can each feel like a time of wandering. There's the kind of aimless wandering one might feel when one feels lost in the woods, or lost in their identity. Not knowing who you really are is an existential kind of wandering that

comes with little hope and is a companion of despair. It's a feeling I have known personally. During the pandemic you may have felt this. OR you may be feeling it now. The pandemic has put many in an identity crisis as we face ourselves perhaps more directly than before trapped in our own four walls or habits with ourselves to face daily like never before. You may feel like you don't even know who you are anymore or that none of this matters.

But it does matter. Our names and identities matter to us. And you matter to God.

In the gospel today. Jesus is speaking openly. He's clear who he is and what his call by God is going to lead to in his life: suffering and death. It seems this is the pattern often for those who speak out against systems of power: suffering for sure, and death often.

Peter doesn't like this picture Jesus has painted for this movement he is following, for this Rabbi he loves, and so he speaks against it. I love Peter who is also someone who has been renamed. Recall he was Simon, now Peter, meaning "Rocky". And he sure can be a granite blockhead and not as stable as a rock. And that's why I love him. He's an imperfect disciple just like the rest of us. He's human. Jesus speaks harsh words, rebuking Peter and those who may not get on board with the mission he's clear about.

You see Jesus is winding and wandering his way to a cross in Jerusalem. That's what we contemplate this Lent. A God willing to risk it all in love for us. But Jesus' wandering isn't aimless and pointless. It is a wandering path that has suffering and joy, but most importantly wonder too. Jesus lives life connected to the wonder and mystery of God. Jesus in his wandering journey in Mark takes time away from others to pray to God, to commune with the Holy. He gets

clearer in who he is and what he is called to do. He knows he is Mary and Joseph's son, and God's beloved child, born into and for the world. And that his name means something.

My friend, you too were claimed and named by God in your baptism. When you were splashed by the waters of baptism, you were claimed, named, and adopted into this family of God, into the body of Christ in a new way. In baptism God is fulfilling a promise and claiming for you a new identity, not unlike he did for Abraham and Sarah. You are God's child and a follower of Jesus now. You are adopted and made new. And if you've not been baptized or wonder about it please ask a pastor or church leader.

Whether baptized or not yet, your wandering can also be the kind of wandering that fills you with wonder along the way, wondering what God is calling you to, wondering what God has in store for you, wondering what hopeful future God is leading the world into that you get to be a part of in some small way.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

This call by Jesus can be hard to understand but I wonder if an image may help. Take your hand and make a fist. Now imagine someone is coming around to you to pour sand into your hand. How might you hold it? Would you loosen your grip? Would you cup your hand as to hold more sand? And if after, you were asked again while still holding

the sand to make a fist once more, what would happen? Where would the sand go? Would you squeeze much of it out of your hand?

I wonder as I wander this Lent during pandemic, if I squeeze the heck out of life much of the time, if I try to control it with my grip, if I try to hold onto life in a way that's not helpful to me and others. If only I could be more or do more, I might know our future. How can I keep my family safe? How can we get back to inperson church and in person school? How can I fulfill my dreams and my children's? But I wonder.

What if I loosened my grip on who I am and what I am called to be? What if I found a position of being more receptive to the love of God being poured into my life? What if I could truly be grateful for my life as it is, as well as wondering into a better future? It could add the wonder back into this time of wandering. And I wonder if this is a way for us to think about losing more of our lives in order to save them.

Perhaps if we hold it all more loosely, we'll be able to receive the grace of God more freely in our lives, and be more free in the giving over to this life as followers of Christ.

Don't be ashamed of who you are or living into figuring that out more clearly. Don't be ashamed of knowing about God's free grace and love for you and the world. Don't be ashamed of claiming your identity as a beloved child of God and naming all you see as beloved too. I wonder if that's exactly what you are called to be. I wonder if that's who we are in Christ-- imperfect, beloved, claimed disciples of Christ wandering WITH wonder. AMEN.