

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT
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A brochure I have received from an airline features a tantalizing come-on. "Sometimes," it reads, "you have to get where you are going to discover who you are." Really? Clearly the airline has come up with this observation to entice me to take a lot of trips. They promise that if I keep flying off to different places, I'll not only be rewarded with lots of frequent flyer miles but with the gift of self-discovery. An aha moment of revelation awaits on a beach in Tahiti, a mountaintop in Switzerland, or a dude ranch in Montana. Now it's true that we sometimes have great insights when we get away from home, away from the familiar and the ordinary. Sometimes when we find ourselves in different environments, in different cultures with different values, we can get a clearer sense of what matters to us. But the more I have thought about it, it seems to me that discovering who I am, discovering the meaning and purpose of my life, must come first or I will never get anywhere that will matter. Knowing my identity is the necessary start to life's journey, not the reward at journey's end.

Look at the example of Jesus. It was because Jesus had a clear sense of who he was and what he had to do that he set out for Jerusalem and all that awaited him there. Hence the significance of the Transfiguration described in today's Gospel. The dazzling light, the vision of ancient holy men, and the booming voice crying, "This is my beloved son," were a confirmation of Jesus' God-given identity and mission. Knowing that, knowing who he was and what he was called to do, Jesus was able to go down from the mountaintop and begin his journey to the cross.

It is also clear that the vision of Jesus' glory gave such a powerful sense of identity and purpose to his disciples that it guided and sustained them for the rest of their lives. The Transfiguration was just a glimpse of the insight that would burst upon the disciples more fully on the first Easter morning: that there is nothing in all creation, even death, that can separate God's children from God's love. With that Good News as their confidence and the proclaiming of that Good News as their mission, those first Christians went out into all the world, ready to speak before kings and governors, enduring all sorts of suffering and hardship.

We need to know who we are and what our life's purpose is. "If there is no vision, the people perish," says the book of Proverbs. Meaning and purpose are as necessary to our well-being as food and shelter. Without a sense of identity and purpose, we are like rudderless boats at the mercy of the world's currents. Who knows where we might end up?

It is also important that our vision be big enough and noble enough to be Godly. Who am I? The world around us bombards us with many possibilities. You are a member of this or that family, a black man, a white woman, an American, an office worker, a professional, a wife, a mother, a husband, a father, a Republican, a Democrat, gay, straight. But none of these identities is sufficient to sustain us in life's storms or to give our lives lasting meaning and purpose. Furthermore, if we make one of these identities our highest value, it can lead to disastrous consequences. Nationality, gender, race, politics ... all of these, if given too much loyalty, can lead to division, conflict, and injustice. We saw it this week during the impeachment trial. The party affiliations of people of both sides involved pulled them away from the questions at hand into the passions of politics. And that was also true for each of us watching.

Consider, by contrast to these lesser identities, the identity that God gives us. Who am I? The Good News that Jesus brings is that I am God's beloved child. God knows me thoroughly, even knows the number of hairs on my head, and loves me always. Jesus is God's eternal Valentine. Furthermore, God calls me to share this Good News with everyone and to work, pray, and give so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus also says that his followers are to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, fishers of people, hearers and doers of God's word, as well as heralds, witnesses, and prophets.

Now that's a big vision, a vision big enough and noble enough to last a lifetime and to make a life worth living. It is a vision that comes from God and that God will sustain and renew.

I have been reading a biography of James W. C. Pennington. It is the remarkable story of a runaway black slave who became an influential minister and leader of the abolitionist movement in mid-19th century America. Pennington always described the great turning point of his life not as the day he escaped from the plantation where he had been born, but as the day he was welcomed into the home of a Quaker farmer. Pennington, a fugitive slave on the run, had not eaten for days when one

cold morning he knocked on the Quaker's door and asked if the farmer could give him work. Pennington never forgot the man's kindly reply: "Well, come in then and take thy breakfast and get warm and we will talk about it; thee must be cold without any coat." No one, especially a white man, had ever treated Pennington like this. He was taken in, fed, clothed, protected, and given work to do that gave him merit and worth and much-needed income. At last, he felt like he had found a friend and a home.

God's love was made real in the words and actions of a Quaker farmer, and through them, Pennington came to see himself as a person with value, dignity, and purpose. The slave became a beloved child of God, and this new identity shaped the rest of Pennington's life. It gave him courage in the face of great obstacles as he gained an education, and when he became a Christian minister, it inspired him to speak out fearlessly against the evils of slavery.

Fred Craddock, noted American preacher, recalls a conversation he once had with a young father he met while making a pastoral call in a small hospital in rural Georgia. The man's newborn daughter was lying in her bassinet behind the glass window in the maternity ward. "Beautiful baby," said Craddock, looking at the tiny red-faced creature squirming and crying her head off. And then, because Craddock thought the young father might be concerned, he added, "Don't worry; she's not sick. It's good for babies to cry like that. It clears out their lungs and gets their voices going." The young man replied, "Oh, I know she's not sick, but she sure is mad as hell." "Why do you think so?" asked Craddock. And the man answered, "Well, wouldn't you be mad? One minute you're with God in heaven and the next minute you're in Georgia." Craddock inquired, "You believe she was with God before she came here?" "Sure do," the man replied. Craddock then asked, "Do you think she'll remember?" The man responded, "Well, that's up to her mother and me. And it's up to the church. We've got to make sure that she remembers, because if she forgets, she's a goner."

It IS crucial that we remember where we came from, who we really are, because the remembering has a lot to do with where our lives will take us. And if we forget, we will get into big trouble. That's why we have seasons of reflection and renewal like Lent - which starts this Wednesday. We've got to take steps to remember our God-given identity and purpose, our heavenly origin. We have got to remind each other about who we are and why we are here. We do so by reading together the Holy Scriptures, the collected memory of God's people. We do so by praying together for the needs of the world and offering ourselves in service to God's mission of healing the creation. When we do these things, our lives are transfigured. We see ourselves as people who matter, who can make a difference in this world. We will care about how we spend our time and our money, the truthfulness of what we say, the effect of our words and actions on those around us, the kind of leaders that we elect. We will seek to make our years on earth count for something, something that will endure.

Many of the questions of life, the dilemmas that we face, get framed as a choice between two directions. We anguish over whether we should choose Path A or Path B, to impeach or not to impeach. Maybe the real question to ask at these crossroads is "Who am I?" If we were to be clearer about our answer to that question, wouldn't we know which way we should go?