

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: June 11, 2023 Year A, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Using "I've been Meaning to Ask" resources from *A Sanctified Art* (Week 1 of 4)

Text: Genesis 2:4b-15 and John 1:35-51

Title: "Where are you from?" (From *A Sanctified Art*)

Focus: We are all shaped by where we are from. Sometimes, people may have impressions or assumptions about us which we find limiting. (And we may have the same limiting view towards others.) Can we remain curious, seek conversation, demonstrate we can listen well as we seek to connect with others?

First Reading Genesis 2:4b-15

⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord GOD made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up — for the Lord GOD had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground — ⁷then the Lord GOD formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the Lord GOD planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord GOD made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The Lord GOD took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Gospel Reading John 1:35-51

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought

Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Quiz Questions Again

I've got some Quiz Questions for you again—a couple weeks ago on Pentecost Sunday I posed some State of Nevada Quiz Questions to you and then that church mission question,

- If you had \$1000 and 5 eager participants in your setting, what mission project would you start?

I wrote several Quiz Questions for the Tuesday Bible Study, but just want to pose one to you today:

- Describe a time when you traveled to (or moved to) a place you had not been before. What did you learn about that place or people from that place? What did you learn about yourself and the place you were from?

I'd like to respond to this one myself. . . I grew up in Southern California. I went to college an hour's drive from where I grew up.

I'm happy with those circumstances and choices, but after I graduated from college, I also realized I wanted to live somewhere different. I knew I wanted to work full-time in a church before going to seminary and I knew I wanted to experience a different culture and place than I had known in growing up in Southern California and in going to college within that same general cultural setting.

I didn't want to graduate from seminary school and have to evaluate receiving a call as a pastor to a particular church in a particular community without having lived in a different area of the country with a different culture from what I had known growing up.

So, that intent led me to accept an opportunity to serve as the Director for Youth Ministries at First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City, TN. I loaded up my stuff in a yellow Hertz Penske rental truck in Southern California and my college buddy Jeff drove with me on this 2200-mile, 3-day (long days!) adventure and we made it to Johnson City, Tennessee.

I lived and worked there for almost 4 years until I went to seminary. Moving to Johnson City was what I wanted and was ultimately a good experience and I have some lifelong friends from there but adjusting to living there was hard, especially early on. I was 23 years old and there were a lot of differences to make sense of and to adapt to.

- **I knew no one for 1500 miles.**
- **I was from California.** I'm happy about where I grew up, but the differences were significant to this new culture: People have interesting perceptions of California and Californians. In many ways, people seem to think California is appealing. There are aspects of it which are well-known across the country—like the glitz of the entertainment industry or maybe the allure of professional sports teams. There are well-known landmarks and heavyweight cities like Los Angeles. There is the perception that there is always something exciting happening. I remember when one high schooler asked me, with some skepticism, “Why would you want to move here?” as though nothing could be as exciting as movie premiers and awards shows and seeing the Lakers live at the Fabulous Forum.

There are oodles of misperceptions, like the surprised expression of wonder, “You mean there are *mountains* in California?!” as though the entire state is an endless beach like you see on *Baywatch*. I wanted to reply, “Yeah, the highest in the country outside of Denali in Alaska!”

Despite the comments about the appeal of California, there were also, ironically, simultaneous expressions of disdain—like that all people from there must be fake, or something.

- **I was an outsider.** I think anybody *not* from Johnson City may have been viewed as an outsider, but perhaps especially someone from California or another place which may be perceived as being far different.
- **Trust:** Where I lived in Tennessee, the way that people know if they can trust you is to know who your daddy is—or better yet, your granddaddy. You belong and you can be trusted or you're “good people” if they know you dating all the way back to your granddaddy.
- **Overcoming Skepticism:** I think I had to work hard or be determined to develop relationships in order to overcome some of the negative perceptions or the skepticism with which people viewed outsiders. I had to be disciplined not to be discouraged but stick to what I thought was important in building relationships of

trust in order to overcome the tendency of erecting barriers for outsiders. I don't know that anyone intentionally put a "barrier" in my way, it's just that they exist. "You're not from here, you're different," and so that's a barrier to trust and acceptance.

- **"Honorary Volunteer"** One time I was complimented by someone who told me I was an "Honorary Volunteer." The "Volunteer" part of that comment comes from Tennessee's state nickname being the Volunteer State, like Nevada is the Silver State or California the Golden State. When this gentleman said this, I had probably been there about 3 years and perhaps by that time had built some trust and respect. He meant it as a compliment because he intended to convey that people from Tennessee liked me. But it also reinforced that I was an outsider—by being an "*Honorary Volunteer*" I of course wasn't a *real* Volunteer, and while I could be let in or trusted to some degree, I was only let in so much. I had, after all, been there about 3 years, not 3 generations.
- Have you experienced something like that? Have you been an outsider and been viewed with some skepticism?
- Or remember the Quiz Question: Describe a time when you were in a place you had not been before. What did you learn about that place or people from that place? What did you learn about yourself and the place you were from?

I've been meaning to ask. . . and "Where are you from?"

Today we begin a four-week series using resources from *A Sanctified Art* around the theme, "I've been meaning to ask. . ."

You likely hear the conversational nature of that series title:

- It sounds like two people talking together.
- It sounds like one gently initiating a little bit deeper conversation—as though they have something specific on their mind and wish to ask about it and genuinely listen for the response.
- As just one partner in this conversation, they're not sure where it may go, but they're interested in continuing, in conveying warmth, in forging or deepening a connection. As a question, it signals one's intent or one's hopes. To the degree that it steps out or takes a risk—because one could surely sit back and say or do nothing and remain isolated—it is an expression of hope and a willingness to be vulnerable—if only just a little bit.
- For the creative leaders from *A Sanctified Art*, the series is borne out of their recognition of the distance and disconnection we have felt or experienced during the pandemic and which lingers still while we find our way out of the pandemic and into a world which is different than it was before.
- The series is like an honest conversation. It's an invitation to share a bit of ourselves and to seek ways to connect with or care for another.

This week's question is "Where are you from?" The focal scriptures from Genesis and the Gospel of John have to do with where we are from, our identity, and our connection to God, to the place we are from, and our connection to each other.

God and Adam in Genesis

The first reading from Genesis is a foundational text which shapes the identity of humankind or at least of those who connect with this text. The imbedded context along with the text itself establish that

- God is the loving, creative force behind the universe.
- "God formed man from the dust of the ground. . ." (Gen. 2:7)
 - There is an intentional play on words in Hebrew here:
 - "*Man*" in English is "adam" in Hebrew. ("ah dom")
 - *Ground or soil or earth* in English is *adama* in Hebrew. ("AH-duh-mah")

So, the text says something like "*Then the Lord God formed the man (adam) out of dirt (adama) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature*" (Gen. 2:7).

In the text's poetic way, it is affirming that we are connected to or a part of where we are from. It shapes us and our identity. As described in Genesis, that connection is not just to the land or ground or the place where we're from, but we are intimately connected to God. God shapes this creature and breathes life into it. This impacts how we see ourselves as created by God, but doesn't it also impact how we see others—as also shaped by God, given life and breath from God, and beloved by God?

This week's theme question, "Where are you from?", when asked with sincerity and intentionality, invites, "Tell me more about yourself and the factors that shaped you."

Gospel Reading: Jesus and the Disciples

The reading from John also has to do with identity, relationship, or connection, and discovering one's call or purpose.

John as Herald and Jesus as Messiah

The "John" mentioned here is John the Baptist/Baptizer. He has his own followers or disciples and directs them to Jesus, telling them, "Look, here is the lamb of God," meaning, "Here is the Messiah, the one for whom we have been waiting." This understanding of Jesus as Messiah is confirmed when Andrew introduces Simon Peter to Jesus as "Messiah" (v. 41).

Disciples

Another part of the identity formation in this passage is not just around the identify of Jesus or the role of John in pointing him out, but of the disciples. Jesus calls

them as disciples. He actually gives Simon a new name, declaring him to be “Cephas,” which is Peter or “rock.”

And, just like I described how some people responded to me as when I first moved to Johnson City, there are perceptions and perhaps misconceptions about where Jesus is from too. When Philip tells Nathaniel Jesus is from Nazareth, he scoffs, “**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**” (John 1:46).

His comment reflected the prevailing view about the town of Nazareth:

- It was viewed as a small, insignificant town. It probably had between 200 and 400 residents. Those residents were probably, at best, of modest means and more likely poor.
- When Nathaniel skeptically asks, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he’s probably not only speaking with a negative perception of Nazareth, he’s also saying something about the Messiah (which is what John has just declared about Jesus.) He’s saying “Surely someone as important as the Messiah, the one for whom we have been waiting, will not come from Nazareth. No way can the Messiah come from Nazareth!” His comments say something about the town as well as about Jesus as the proclaimed Messiah.

Reflections on “I’ve been meaning to ask . . .”

I’m looking forward to exploring this theme of “I’ve been meaning to ask. . .”

Some thoughts:

- We are all shaped by where we are from; that history impacts our identity.
- Sometimes, people may have impressions of us or preconceptions that are limiting or that we find restrictive.
 - In Johnson City, I had to be persistent or diligent to overcome some skepticism based on being viewed as an outsider.
 - “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” asked Nathaniel.

And, let’s be honest, sometimes we, too, have limiting perceptions of others.

The highlight of the gospel story for me is Jesus’ invitation, which gets picked up and repeated by Philip: “**Come and see**” (John 1:39 and 1:46).

Though the comment, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” was said by Nathaniel to Philip (and not directly to Jesus) no one seemed put off by it. Philip repeated the invitation he had heard and received: “Come and see” (v. 46).

“**I’ve been meaning to ask . . .**” invites us into conversation. It invites us to not stop at the assumptions or preconceptions that may not be the whole story, but to persist in conversation—to acknowledge the assumptions, but also move beyond them by staying curious and asking questions and by listening well. May we have the curiosity and courage to stay in conversation and the wisdom to listen well.