

Who am I?

Where am I going?

A question of identity; a question of purpose.

Without a doubt, these two questions have driven more discussion, spilled more ink, and sparked more conflict than any other two ideas in the history of humanity.

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They are questions asked in every age, that cross racial and ethnic boundaries and defy economic and social distinctives.

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They have driven philosophers, poets, novelists and filmmakers for the last five centuries, yet today we are still no closer to an answer.

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These are questions the church must grapple with; not only because we believe that the eternal answers to these questions are found within the pages of scripture; not only because we live in a world where these questions when left unanswered produce the anxiety and despair that are so prominent in our world today; but because as a church the questions of identity and purpose are central to our survival?

What does it mean to be a Christ follower when there are a million other things I can be instead?

What does God have for us to do in this place at this time?

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These are the questions behind every other question; beneath every fight and disagreement; at the root of both success and failure.

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They are the questions of a now-but-not-yet people.

When Moses climbed the mountain after forty years of wandering, and looked – he saw the promised land. He saw the place God had been preparing, and in that moment, he became a now-but-not-yet leader. The exodus was over. The people were home.

So who am I now if the Exodus is over? Where are we going now?

When Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after a generation in Babylon and saw a city defenseless, they determined that Jerusalem's temple could one day live again. In that moment of casting a vision they would not see completed, they became now-but-not-yet people.

Who do we want to be? In view of everything we've been through, in light of all that's happened, who will we choose to be from this moment on?

I had my moment the other day as I was driving home. I looked up at the sky and the long late evenings, and thought to myself: summer's here. I know saying that in Calgary is a little bit like tempting fate, but it was in that moment that it struck me: summer means Tim will be here soon, and Tim's arrival means that this long period of waiting is over, just not yet.

We are a people in waiting, and so it's fitting that on the day the Church remembers and celebrates its birth at Pentecost that we would take a moment to reflect together on the purpose and identity that the Spirit imparts to us. Because a people in waiting are always called to prepare.

For four hundred years, God was silent. From the closing of the Old Testament to the opening of the New, God said nothing. But in this silence, John reminds us, and as we will see next few weeks, was a call to prepare. The now-but-not yet

We prepare because the new thing God has done was invite us into this holy mess we call Church – not as servants, but as partners in the mission of Good News for the whole world. The Church does nothing without preparation. We prepare for Christmas with Advent; we prepare for Easter with Lent, and we prepare for Pentecost with Easter. God, in mercy and grace, doesn't go zero to eighty in a flash, but grants us space to keep pace; space to prepare. Preparation is an act of grace.

In the case of Christ, it was the arrival first on the scene of John, the Baptizer – cousin of Jesus, one who is called to prepare. In John the church is given a model of preparation; a portrait of preparation to imitate and learn from as we grow into our now-but-not-yet selves.

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And what we find is that both are rooted in eternity.

John begins his Gospel by telling us that this isn't history being written down, but theology. He traces the story of Jesus back to the very moment of creation, and there – rooted in eternity,

before time and matter were even things to be considered, we find John's namesake. It's an interlude, probably there, scholars believe, to remind those few holdouts who still followed John that the Baptizer was part of a bigger picture, that still following John was like going to a concert just to see the opening act.

But that doesn't mean that the Baptizer was unimportant.

The questions of identity and purpose are not limited by who you are or what you're doing, because those will always only be temporary. Why do you think that anxiety, depression, and mental illness are at an all time high – especially among the youngest people? Who you are will die. What you're doing will end. Your memories will fade and your legacy will turn to dust. The most significant influencers today will be footnotes in a hundred years. But like the baptizer, if we find identity and purpose in eternity, nothing can ever take that away.

So how?

John says the Baptizer came as a witness to testify to the eternity's light. Witnessing wasn't what he did. Witnessing was who he was.

In 1996, a 38 year old security guard at a Pennsylvania middle school convinced Tanya Kach, aged 14, to leave her father and live with him. For the next ten years, the guard kept Tanya captive in the home he shared with his elderly parents. To keep her from running away, her captor convinced the girl that no one cared that she was gone and that her parents weren't even looking for her. You're stupid and immature he told her. Nobody cares about you but me.

Eventually though, the guard became so confident in Tanya's loyalty that he allowed her to leave the house for short periods of time while he was at work. Through these excursions, Tanya became friends with Joseph Sparico, the owner of the local deli.

In March of 2006, Tanya finally confessed her true identity to Sparico who shared the information with his son, a retired police officer. Before long, Tanya was rescued and reunited with her father. Commending on the girl's situation, Sparico said, she wanted to be wanted. That's all.

Tanya's father, Jerry, had desperately tried to find his daughter over the years, posting her picture several thousand times on flyers and milk cartons. He was overjoyed to see her. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of her. I just say thank God my little girl is back home.

Tanya too was delighted to learn that her father had never given up looking for her. He's crying, I'm crying, and all he kept saying is I got my baby girl back. I'm touching blood.

It's easy to forget who we are when we live in a world that tells us over and over again that we're cosmic accidents, collections of particles. When all we hear is the message that we are

finite, we start to live finitely. But you were not made to be finite. You bear the image of God and like the Baptizer before you, your life witnesses to light of Christ.

Your identity is rooted in eternity, because from eternity, before the foundations of the earth were set, God had written your name on his hand. You were always intentional, and it is the goal of the church, each and every day to live with that sense of intention. We are not accidents. Life is not random. God is bigger than any fork in road or unexpected circumstance. This is your witness.

And like it, your purpose.

Because Purpose is an identity statement.

The baptizer was not the light, says John, but he came to testify to the light.

He lived as a witness, and he worked out of his sense of identity.

Your job is not what you do. Your hobbies are not your purpose. Your purpose is found in understanding exactly who God created you to be and living that every day from now until the end of time. Purpose is an identity statement.

Christians without goals are a little like Alice in the fairy tale ALICE IN WONDERLAND. In a conversation between her and the Cheshire Cat, Alice asked, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat. "I don't much care where," said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the cat.

When you understand who God has made you to be, what God is calling you to do will become clear. We live in this culture ...

Frederick Beuchner said, the place God calls you to is where your deep joy meets the world's deep need.