

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
February 18, 2018
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Texts: Genesis 9:8-17
 Mark 1:9-15

Sermon Title: I + XI = X

Well, here I am, again, perhaps a little less the stranger than last week, but probably not very much. Were we together in a different time and setting—one in which I was not floating somewhere high above you and expected to stay here—I might suggest we could play a get-to-know-you game.

“How do you see yourself?” I’d ask. “Are you more like a kite string or a clothesline? Kite strings to one side of the room, clotheslines to the other.” Most of you would move one way or the other, though many of you would make it clear in your body language that you thought this was really dumb. After inviting you to notice who was on one side of the room or the other, I’d ask a few of you to tell why you see yourself this way. The kite string folks would say things like, *I like to move about freely*, or, *I’d rather play than work*, or, *I keep things up in the air*. And the clothesline folk, with their own growing sense of conviction, would explain their side: *I’m reliable*; or *I’m strong*, or *I like to know what my place is*.

I’ve done this enough times to know that, about this time, something remarkable often happens. Kite strings—it’s almost always the kite strings—begin to try to convince clothes lines to change sides, to come join them. To be like them. Because they’re better.

Kite strings or clotheslines is a fanciful kind of game, one of those touchy-feely things thought up by someone with too much time on their hands. But even in its fanciful form—and almost certainly when the forced choices got to be more difficult or politically charged—the game often opens a window to a far deeper issue: that the way we construct our identities, individually and communally—even in a simple game like this—quickly begins to define not only how we see ourselves, but how we see others.

This morning, I’d like us to stop playing games for a moment and get serious, about one of the most important questions you’ll ever need to answer.

Who are you?

This is not a request for data, the stuff we put on driver’s licenses and census forms: names and addresses and birthdates and eye color. Nor is it a request for cocktail party revelations: what you do or where you live or how much money you make or what school you graduated from; your favorite club or restaurant or political leanings.

These are fine things to know, to be sure; And in many settings, they are in fact the currency of identity and social status. And, of course, an increasingly common means to divide us. But I am interested in something else, something deeper. Not accomplishments, but identity. Who you are. Who you are, and what it is that finally shapes you, and forms you, as a person. What helps you decide how you will act, and how you will make decisions and treat others not like you.

I've stopped being surprised at the anxiety this question often provokes. We know the words we want to use to describe who we are—courage and compassion and generosity. But we also know the deep social loyalties that pull at us. We hear the divisive rhetoric; we read the hate-filled email we can't quite fathom; we watch a friend become someone we no longer recognize; we get pressured to bend our practices to something we know isn't right, and we're suddenly not sure. And what we're most unsure of is whether there really is any room for us to be themselves.

Who are you?

Perhaps you've noticed the sermon title in the bulletin; feel free to look if you haven't. If you're good with Roman numerals, you know what it says: 1 + 11 = 10. Makes you a little skeptical about me, doesn't it? Hope they don't let this guy handle the Presbytery's money! Especially if you're one of those skeptics, or one of those wrestling with your own sense of identity, why don't you turn the bulletin upside down. Now what do you see: 10 = 1 + 9. Hmmm. Sometimes, it seems, you just need a change in perspective.

Perhaps that's where Scripture can help us today. The question of identity—who you are—is one of the most important themes of Scripture. But with a different perspective. In Scripture, your identity finally isn't primarily about what you've done. It's about who God is.

Here's what I mean. We've known the flood story in Genesis since we were children: Noah and animals and rainbows. It's the kind of story virtually every ancient society and religion includes in its sacred text, intended to explain the chaos of the world. What is remarkable, and rather unique, about our flood story is not, however, the floating zoo aspect of it, but rather how it ends: In our flood story, through a simple symbol, the rainbow, God makes a stunning promise. I will never destroy the earth again. In that simple pronouncement, God's has forever linked God's fortunes with our fortunes; God's self-giving, God's justice, God's heart—all are now forever tied to our self-giving, our justice, our heart. Our human desires for learning, freedom, meaning, love—those are, in the end, God's own heart, forever linked to the people God loves.

The book of Genesis is all about beginnings, and one of its most concrete affirmations is this: you begin as one of God's own. And will always remain this.

That truth runs all through Mark's story of Jesus. In his baptism, Jesus hears God's affirmation of him, affirmations we repeat in our own liturgies. Driven into the wilderness of life, God is there. Called to ministry, God is there. The rainbow still fills the skies.

Scripture tells us many things about life, and about living, but no word from Scripture is more frequent than this: that the question of who you are is finally not about what you do, no matter what you do, or don't. It's not in how you feel about yourself, no matter how you feel. Identity is not a matter of psychology, but a matter of theology. A question not of who you are, but whose you are: that beyond all else is a God who knows you; who loves you; who has been committed to you from the beginning of time, and still is today. And who calls you to a life far better than the one we often choose to give ourselves.

But know this, too—that, as in our Gospel lesson—knowing and claiming your identity as “Beloved” is often linked, as it was for Jesus, to the wilderness. My good friend Rick Hamlin published a piece in the *New York Times* this week: What Will You Give Up for Lent.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/opinion/what-will-you-give-up-for-lent.html>) I was especially

taken with the paragraph that looked past the rather predictable title question the Times gave Rick's reflections into today text from Mark:

*What does it mean to wander in the wilderness for 40 days and nights and face your demons?
How would I do that today? How do you give up all distractions and listen to that inner voice that
tells you who you are and what you need to be doing but can't quite face yet?*

This world we live in can often seem like a wilderness. Just this week, for example, a belief of scarcity pit person against person, group against group, where welcoming even one more was framed as less for us. Just this week, a lonely, mentally-ill young man with virtually unfettered access to the world's most fearsome means to take life, took 17 lives and, with that, the hopes and dreams of so many other parents and friends.

The wilderness says, people are replaceable, forgettable, loseable.
God says, You are mine, forever.

The wilderness says, Prove yourself. Get as much as you can.
God says, You already have everything you need.

The wilderness says, Find your identity is what you earn, and what you wear, and what you drive.
God says, Don't go looking for your identity. Start with it. And live out of it.

In this Lenten season, I think today's texts call us, just as Mark reports Jesus was called, to brave the wilderness of our world, by asking Who am I, and, What am I being called to do? Let me suggest that it will be something that makes a difference. Something that makes you different. Better. Stronger. More in touch with the person God shaped and formed you to be. Something that rejects the false narrative of our culture, that we can somehow find happiness in simply living for ourselves. Something that impacts your community. Something that honors God's commitment to humanity that God hung in the skies long, long ago.

This Lenten season, will you make a commitment to use these 40 days like Jesus did: to discover the identity you already have and that thing you need to be doing but can't quite face yet. To do it, you may, like Jesus, have to live amongst the wild beasts—self-doubt or boundary-setting or rejection or never-good-enough or who-do-you-think-you-are. But we go into this challenging time with a promise that is regularly hung in the heavens, and spoken from the clouds: Beloved.

Your identity as God's own has already equipped you to enter, head-first, into the realities of life, like Jesus did; to engage your temptations, like Jesus did; to live and love and maybe even die, like Jesus did, for purposes bigger than our own. Lent calls us to turn the page and gain a new perspective, to consider doing something we haven't yet been able to face. There's no better time for that than right now. As children of God, beloved, gifted, blessed, and called into this broken world so loved by God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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