**“Come Up”**

**Mark 1: 9-15**

**Jesus’ Baptism**

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and it begins with the story of Jesus’ baptism. So let us ponder the meaning of baptism. Do you remember your own baptism? I don’t remember mine because I received infant baptism. People receive baptism for various reasons. Some receive or have their children baptized because they want to be God’s family. Some receive baptism simply because it’s their family tradition. Some receive it because they assume that baptism is a kind of guarantee of their salvation from hell and it will solve their problems! While people receive baptism for different reasons, the meaning of the baptism essentially relates to the question ‘who am I?’

We all wear many hats. No one has a singular identity. Individuals are multifaceted, complex beings, and it's rare for any one aspect of their identity to define them entirely. Jesus was a Jewish man and a citizen of the occupied nation by the Roman Empire. He was the son of a carpenter and highly likely, he himself was a carpenter. It means that the economic status of his family was to be poor. He was the eldest brother of his household. It seems that he had a very good relationship with his mother. He was also very devoted to God and some scholars speculate about a potential connection between Jesus and the Essenes, a religious group known for their ascetic lifestyle, communal living, and strict adherence to Jewish laws. What I would like to say is that Jesus himself also wore many hats. Do you think that Jesus considered himself the Son of God when he was growing up or before his official ministry? Would Jesus have had some kind of identity crisis when he was a teenager, just like most people do? What do you think? Maybe, maybe not. But I am sure that Jesus must have seriously pondered the question, “who am I?” This question, ‘who am I?’ is a fundamental question for all people. This is especially important for Christians because the answer to this question defines the ultimate value and the direction of one’s life.

Do you have a clear answer to the question, ‘who am I?’ We often assume that we know ourselves quite well, but in reality, many people including myself do not know who we really are. In his poem, “Who am I?,” Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor, who fought against Nazi-Germany, described his struggle to find the answer to this question. He wrote,

Who am I? This or the Other?

Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,

And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army

Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

This is an honest response to the question of “who am I?” At the beginning of Lent, take some time to reflect about who you really are. Think of how you understand yourself and how your identity shapes your life.

**Going Down**

While we have multiple identities, baptism offers us a primary identity that can organize and integrate diverse identities as a whole. Baptism involves two basic movements: going down into the water and coming up out of the water. In the gospel of Mark, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” In baptism, we go down and face many shadows of ourselves and even our sins. We all have shadow selves. Our shadow is what we refuse to see about ourselves and what we try to hide from both ourselves and others. Asbury SPRC points out that a non-anxious presence is one of my gifts. However, according to the Enneagram Personality test, my type of personality is primarily driven by fear and anxiety. Surprise! You didn’t know it. I didn’t know it either before I learned about the Enneagram. Each of you has your own shadows. Facing our shadows is not easy, but once we honestly face and accept them, we also gain some degree of power and freedom to choose whether to be driven by our shadows or not. Instead of unconsciously reacting to external stimuli, we can be conscious of what’s going on in our hearts and consciously choose what to do. But first, we must face our shadows. In our baptism, we go down first and face our shadow selves and sins. We faced them and acknowledged them in our confession of sin.

**Come Up!**

At the same time, in our baptism, we not only go down into the water but we also come up out of the water. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is God’s affirmation of who he was, the Son of God, God’s beloved! This is the most important thing that happens in our baptism. We become God’s beloved children. This profound affirmation by God becomes the primary identity for Christians whose identities are integrated by this identity as God’s beloved children. This positive self-identity offers us the strength to resist sin and be resilient to the harmful effects of radical evil and the power to transform an unjust world.

I know that Asbury UMC had a wonderful basketball team at one time. I know Pete Peterson was a good basketball player! [ppt] Do you know Bill Russell? He was an NBA great who anchored a Boston Celtics dynasty in 1950s to 60s, when they won 11 championships in 13 years. He was a great player. However, he was black and Boston was known as the most racist city in the U.S. then and even now. When he traveled to away games, he and his black colleagues could not use the same bus as his white colleagues. He was subjected to insults even from his home fans. Journalists brutally criticized him when he made mistakes while remaining silent about his excellent performance. Some of them even vandalized his house with insults. Despite being an NBA star player, he suffered discrimination and demeaning insults at that time. As we all know, racism and other forms of discrimination have devastating impact on our souls. Low self-esteem, poor performance, depression. Bill Russell had to face the radical evil of racism, but he was able to defend his soul. How? Family and faith. In one interview, he said, “Years later, people asked me what I had to go through. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I’ve never been through anything like this. From my first moment of life there was the notion that my mother and father loved me.” It was Russell’s mother who would tell him to disregard comments from those who might see him playing in the yard. “Whatever they say, good or bad, they don’t know you,” he recalled her saying. “They’re wrestling with their own demons.” Also, he attributed his success and resilience on the court to his Christian faith. Russell has often talked about how his faith helped him stay focused, maintain a strong work ethic, and overcome challenges both on and off the basketball court. What were the messages he would have heard from the pulpit on Sundays? I am sure that one of them is that he was God’s beloved. By knowing that his parents loved him and God loved him, he could find strength to resist evil and even change it. To resist rampant racism in his time, he marched for civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr. and continued to work on human rights issues. He came up with some good!

My friends, most of us have received baptism. In our baptism, God claimed us as God’s beloved. God loves you no matter what and that’s the bottom line. So don’t let guilt and sin control you. Do not let racial evils control you. For this, we first need to face them honestly and repent of our sins. Then, rise as God’s people and be up to something good! God will surely empower you to transform the world into a better place. Amen.