

“A Most Powerful Identity”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

The Hope and Peace Candles are lit. Living in the hope and peace of the future, yet being very present in the moment is important. George Santayana (1863-1952) writes, “There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval.”¹ The future is before us, yet it must compel us to live differently in the present. Such is enjoying the interval. Advent signals the arrival of our new identity and a most powerful one at that. On this Second Sunday of Advent, we are to experience and begin to grow in peace. Friends, what defines your sense of self and sense of worth?

There is a collision, between the traditional and modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth, which we must address. Pastor and author Timothy Keller writes,

Identity formation is a process that every culture pushes on its members so powerfully and pervasively that it is invisible to us....In ancient cultures, as well as in many non-western cultures today, the self was defined and shaped by both internal desires and external social roles and ties....Your sense of self and worth developed as you moved out toward others, assuming roles in your family and community. If you ask people in a traditional culture, “Who are you?” they will most likely say they are a son or a mother or a member of a particular tribe and people. And if they fulfill their duties and give up their individual desires for the good of the whole family, community, and their God, then their identity is secure as persons of honor. Modern Western identity formation is the very reverse of this....Our culture does not believe we learn or become who we are by sublimating our individual needs for those of the community or family. Rather, “each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality [or identity] is to be realized.”....But modern secularism teaches that we can develop ourselves only by looking inward, by detaching and leaving

¹George Santayana, “War Shrines,” *Soliloquies in England and later Soliloquies*, 1922.

home, religious communities, and all other requirements so that we can make our own choices and determine who we are for ourselves.²

Similarly, as to the story just recounted, Jesus, the Messiah, Savior, and Lord brings order to the world. How? Through Christians being guided by their new identity which is as a beloved child of God. Therein lies a person's true sense of self and sense of worth. And this is how we are to live in the interval between birth and death.

The texts in Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, Romans 15:4-13, and Matthew 3:1-12 proclaim that there is joy to be experienced in our sense of self and sense of worth when we embrace Jesus, the Lover and Judge of humanity.

In Isaiah 11:1-10, Isaiah sets forth a vision for the new heavens and earth that makes a difference now. This new heavens and earth further show the significance for a person's ability to reject modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth. For Isaiah, God is enthroned above all, eternal, and deathless. God will carry out God's every purpose. Solomon, Jesse's grandson, might have seemed to be the fulfillment of the hope of David, but he fell far short of the divine ideal. The "shoot from the stump of Jesse" is Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Isaiah 10:1-4 reads,

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse....The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD...He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...

In Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, the psalmist reasserts the prophet Isaiah's claim that the branch from the tree of Jesse will be a ruler...clothed with righteousness and faithfulness. The psalmist beckons us to make the journey of Advent a renewed commitment to create safer communities and safer relationships as we participate with God in creating the new

²Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, New York: Viking, 2016), 118-119.

heavens and earth. Yes, the psalmist continues the theme of a person's ability to reject modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth. Psalm 72:18 reads, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things."

In Romans 15:4-13, Paul continues the theme of a person's ability to reject modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth. Paul asserts that human unity is in Jesus Christ. This unity transcends everything that divides. Paul urges believers to set aside personal opinions and preferences in order to affirm and empower unity and harmony amongst all people. Romans 15:5-6 reads, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In Matthew 3:1-12, we hear the strong call from John the Baptist in Romans 15:3, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." This call to prepare the way of the Lord continues the theme of a person's ability to reject modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth. Human is to take on a new mindset, a mindset that corresponds with being created in the image of God. According to this text in the Gospel of Matthew, we are to live for transformative justice individually, collectively, and societally. Then what is right will be vindicated as right and wrong exposed as wrong.³

Advent calls you to walk in the interval between birth and death with the present hope and peace promised in the "shoot from the stump of Jesse," Jesus Christ. Therein lies your new identity, which is a powerful one. Your sense of self and sense of worth are

³In all five sections of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of Leanne Van Dyke, David A. Davis, Marci Auld Glass, Jin Young Choi, John M. Buchanan, Raj Nadella, and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher in *Connections, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 17-19, 19-21, 22-23, 24-26, 26-28, 29-31 and 31-33.

defined by God in and through Jesus Christ. Continue shedding cultural and social definitions of each. Return to the traditional understanding of one's sense of self and worth, which promotes the necessity of interdependency with others. Trusting God's promise that you are created in the image of God as a child of God is a most rewarding journey. You are on the journey with others who are also children of God. More on this journey next week as you'll discover that your true sense of self and self worth have already been prepared for each one of us from the beginning of time. Are you ready? I certainly am! Amen.

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations)
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