

Pastor Kenneth Mars

Immanuel Lutheran Church –Burns, WY

Lent II–Midweek (members of St. John’s Kimball, Grace Pine Bluffs, Zion Grover also present)¹

March 4, 2015

Text: Isaiah 44:1–5

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the ways to describe our age, our particular moment in history, is that we live in an age of identity crisis. We don’t seem to know who we are. Did you know, for example, that Facebook gives you 56 different options to describe your gender? Most of human history, people knew they were either male or female. But no longer. How can we know who we are as persons, much less who we are as a nation or a culture, if we can’t understand the basics of our God-given biology?

The ancients understood the importance of knowing your identity. Inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, was the maxim “γνῶθι σεαυτόν or know thyself.” The wisdom of ancient Israel, which predated the Greeks, understood and believed that self-knowledge only comes through the Lord God of heaven and earth, our Creator and Savior. King David writes these beautiful words in Psalm 139:

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

³You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

Self-knowledge, according to Scripture, is an exalted and difficult art; it can only be found in knowing who God is and what He says about you.

Centuries after David wrote Psalm 139, his descendants, the Jewish exiles living in Babylon were having an identity crisis. Living in a foreign land surrounded by strange

¹ Adapted from the sermon Series “Singing with the Exiles” published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 2015.

customs and unknown gods, were they to understand themselves to be Babylonians or God's chosen people? Such self-knowledge wasn't as easy as you might expect.

The Babylonians had this powerful and effective means of assimilating conquered peoples into their culture. They gave them new names, Babylonian names. I bet you know the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These were the three Hebrew men who refused to bow down before the false gods of that greatest of all Babylonian kings, Nebuchanezzar. The king threw them into the fiery furnace but the Lord saved them. Three were thrown into the furnace but a fourth one joined them. Nebuchanezzar saw this fourth one and said he looks like "a son of the gods" (Daniel 3:25). It's a great moment in Biblical history.

But did you know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the Babylonian names given to these three Jewish men? According to Daniel 1:7, Hananiah was renamed Shadrach, Mishael was renamed Meshach, and Azariah was renamed Abednego. The purpose of giving them new Babylonian names was to give them new, Babylonian identities. I've always found it curious that we know them best by their pagan names rather than their Hebrew names.

Tonight's reading from Isaiah 44, describes the Lord's desire that His people retain their identity as God's people. It began with a reminder of to whom they belonged, "But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant..." (vs. 1-2a). Israel was a chosen people, formed by the Lord Himself to bring His message of love and salvation to the world. The Lord reminds them that they are part of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and as plenteous as the sand on the seashore. Through them, the Lord would show His faithfulness and His desire to save the world.

The Lord is the source of their identity. They know themselves rightly and truly only in relation to the God who created them, saved them, and consecrated them as His beloved people. A foreign land, a hostile culture, even pagan names cannot change who they are. They are God's people.

Today, we Americans are not a conquered people. We live in the land of freedom, the home of the brave. We are true, red-blooded Americans. And yet I would submit to you that we also have an identity crisis that's even more profound than confusion over

gender-identity. We are told incessantly that we can be young and beautiful and strong and proud and important if we buy the things the beautiful, strong, proud and important people buy.

This story is beat into our heads from sunup to sundown. It has been estimated that on a typical day in America, we will encounter more than two thousand advertising images, from billboards, magazine ads, side-ads that appear on every website we visit, to the commercials we watch on television and hear on the radio. (That's 125 advertisements per hour, assuming you're awake 16 hours a day!) And these images tell us over and over again the dominant American story—"You can be anyone you want to be and enjoy any amount of happiness, if you have enough money!" And what has all this materialistic prosperity given us? Confusion and fear. We can't even say whether or not we're male or female. As the 20th century author, Percy Walker, once wrote, we're "lost in the cosmos."

The Devil would use our confusion and fear, our "lostness", to distract us from knowing who we really are: we are Christians, children of God, redeemed by the blood of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. So what has God said about us? About who we truly and really are?

The prophet Isaiah told us as well as the psalmist and the apostle Peter. First, Isaiah 44:5, "This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and name himself by the name of Israel." You belong to the Lord. His name is, figuratively speaking, written on your hand. In actuality, the Lord's name, the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was splashed upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism. That is your family name. You were reborn into God's family.

The author of Psalm 100, used earlier in tonight's service, wrote, "Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (vs. 3). You are a divine work of creation. But even more, you are remade into His beloved people. Poetically and figuratively you are the beloved sheep of his pasture, not the world's pasture or the devil's pasture, but the Lord's pasture. And as you well, know He is the Good Shepherd who watches over his beloved sheep.

And finally, we heard who we are from the apostle Peter (I Pe. 2:9-10), "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that

you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God the Father has made you into a holy nation filled with royalty. No longer are you trapped in the confusion and deception of darkness. You are a treasured possession of the Lord Himself, children of light and life, and priest proclaiming excellent praise.

Your identity is determined in the unchangeable love and grace of our God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Do not allow our world to identify you as being so tall, so wide, so dark or light, so rich or poor or whatever. You are the Lord's treasured possession from beginning to end. The Lord Jesus claims you. His cross and empty tomb are the guarantee that your identity is established forever. You are His. And He is yours.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.