

When in the course of life did you discover the purpose, the meaning, the central focus of your existence?

I can remember various people at different times telling me that I should be a minister or that being a minister was a good fit, but I am not talking about other people's ideas and suggestions and affirmations of my living of yours . I am talking about you: When did you discover the direction and the focus that your life should take? Perhaps that has not happened yet: no matter how old you are.

How do you think it might come about?

This understanding of our purpose is a holy moment, but it is not often portrayed as such in our contemporary world. We speak of setting goals, of grasping opportunities, of discipline and hard work, of dominant interests, of talents and abilities. But rarely do we speak of God in these matters—of drawing a direct connection between our life and God's overarching Life. However it happens, it happens. *Somewhere* along the line, we bump into our life, we come to understand a certain direction or vocational interest that begins to unfold. *Our life catches up with us and shows itself to us. We discover who we are.* Our identity and the depth of our identity becomes increasingly clear.

This morning, in this regard, thinking of discovering who we are, we think of Jesus. We have just snippets of his early life. He was raised to be a carpenter in an outlying village: So when did his life catch up with him? When did his identity take shape?

Of the four Gospel narratives in the Bible only two mention the early life of Jesus: Matthew and Luke. But all four of the Gospels deal with the work of John the Baptist. All four detail the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan. Whatever happened to Jesus before, whatever notions he had that he might be different or that his life was going to flow in a different direction from the one he was living with Mary and Joseph, nothing would compare to the time when Jesus came face to face with his own identity, with his deeper meaning, with his sense of call at the moment of his baptism.

John had been in the business of calling people to repentance and his baptism was one in which people were to change. They were to turn around and prepare themselves for a new kingdom, a new rule of god on earth. Their sins were to be washed away and they were to be made new.

But with Jesus, baptism is different. Jesus is not repenting; rather Jesus is discovering. And what he is discovering is the rest of his life. And baptism can be like that.

Today in our reading

The heavens open up. The Spirit of God, symbolized in the form of a dove, descends upon him. The voice comes from the heavens and proclaims Jesus as the Son of God: *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.* So he gets a stamp of approval. His life catches up with him. He receives a sense of mission and purpose. He feels the burden of a new calling. He moves away from his small family in an outlying village and becomes a wandering teacher and prophet. In baptism Jesus finds his identity as the Son of God, the Messiah. In baptism Jesus finds his mission.

I must confess to you that I have a bad habit when it comes to watching movies on DVD : I am a creature of habit. Once I find a movie that I like, I want to see it—over and over again—much to the disgust of my family.

So it is with films like *Hoosiers* or *The Natural* or *Notting Hill*. So brace yourself: Here comes a reference to *The Natural*, that old baseball film in which Robert Redford plays Roy Hobbs, an aging rookie. Near the end of the film, Roy Hobbs is hospitalized with an old injury from a gunshot wound. His life is in danger and his career is pretty much washed up. In the hospital, just before the big game, Roy is visited by his childhood sweetheart who delivers one of the best lines of the film. Looking at a despondent ballplayer lying in that hospital bed, she says: *I believe that each of us has two lives. The one we learn with. And the one we live after that.*

Maybe the two lives' theory is what the baptism of Jesus is all about. The first life is the life Jesus learned with. It is the life of the infant, the toddler, the young boy, the growing adolescent, the young man. the carpenter.

But then there is the other life. The life lived after that.

In baptism Jesus sheds one life and finds another. He moves from learning and becoming into a maturity in which he knows what to do and where to go and what to say. He launches himself into a life of mission and proclamation and healing. The truest and best elements of his life, the depths of his life, his identity, become visible at baptism.

At Baptism we understand that Jesus has a mission. He will not be a carpenter. He will not be a rabbi teaching at the local synagogue. A dangerous and wondrous life stretches ahead of him. And his mission is to pay attention to it.

I think that baptism for us captures a bit of both John's baptism of repentance and Jesus' baptism of mission. Baptism is indeed a cleansing and a claiming. But baptism is also a forming and a calling. A calling to a new a higher existence.

St Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians says something interesting in this regard in chapter two, verse ten. He writes:

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Notice how this verse neatly puts together the idea of a created identity with an idea of mission -- a way of life.

Hear how other translations render that first phrase: *for we are what he has made us.*

- ***For we are God's handiwork...***
- ***For we are God's masterpiece...***
- ***For we are God's workmanship...***
- ***we are what he has made us***

The Greek word is *poeima*. This word in Greek refers to literally *any work of art* and from this word we get in English, the word, 'poem.'

And so we get the idea that we are not just handiwork or workmanship, we come to the more profound idea, a deeper conception, that we are God's -- YHWH's-- work of art. We-- are in our deepest and most true life-- God's poem.

We... are God's poetry, God's masterpiece, God's works of art. And all these terms apply not to the superficial part of who we are. The life we learn with. They probe that other life, the life we live after that, the life perhaps that we do not want to think about.

Thomas Merton once wrote a poem that seems to connect with the two lives inside of us and in Jesus and with the idea of some profound work of art inside of us. He writes:

*Who are you...
Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you one day be.
Rather
Be what you are ... be
The unthinkable one
You do not know.*

The unthinkable one you do not know. The deepest part of who we are. The deepest part that matters within us. The masterpiece. The poem. The work of art waiting for us to discover and claim.

It is never too late to prayerfully live in terms of our baptism; to prayerfully reflect upon what God wants us to discover in terms of the deepest part that waits within us.

Jesus came up out of the water and heard a profound voice from heaven claiming him. And his life became poetry.

And in baptism we have been baptized, submerged, into the death and the life of Christ the anointed one. And there ... we have been given the key to the most profound part of our own existence.

Perhaps it happened years ago. It matters not. What matters is that we live in terms of the life that has been given us, the identity that has been forged, the poem that has been written.

We have been baptized into the death and into the life of Christ.

We have been given a new, deep, profound reason for living.

In baptism, just like in Jesus' baptism, our life has caught up with us.

Baptism -- If we pay attention to our baptism and understand that it binds us to Christ, we can never really be quite the same again.