

TEXT: Mark 1:9-15  
THEME: You are named by God  
SUBJECT: Identity  
TITLE: Came From

First Sunday in Lent  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Jesus *came from* Nazareth in Galilee, a small agricultural village with a population of between 400 to 500 people, the orphaned son of a carpenter. *Coming up* out of the waters of baptism, the Spirit *comes down* on Jesus and a voice *came from* heaven declaring: “You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I delight.”

As Jesus came from Nazareth, so we come from somewhere: Winston Salem, NC; Johnson City, Tennessee; Cleveland, Ohio; Savannah, Georgia . . . If we know where someone comes from, we think we know something about them. South, North, Mid-West, West Coast, East Coast, each region evokes certain images in our minds about the people who come from these places.

We love tracing our ancestry to countries of origin and the advent of DNA testing makes this easier. Some people learn they aren’t from where they thought. I like the commercial about the guy who grew up thinking he was German, only to discover his ancestors were Welsh/Irish, so he traded lederhosen for a kilt.

No matter where you come from, as you come up out of the waters of baptism, the voice that comes from heaven gives you an identity that transcends the particulars of your DNA, your birth place, your country of origin. While you remain Irish or Jamaican or some combination of many tribes, in your baptism you are named daughter/son of God.

It will not take long to discover that your identity as a daughter or son of God will come into conflict with your identity as a Redneck, Yankee, Flatlander, Cheesehead, Buckeye, Tar Heel . . . The values of the kingdom of God and the values of Nazareth or Winston Salem are not the same. The claims made upon you by the kingdom of God will drive you into the wilderness where your loyalties will be tested.

The best way to avoid this conflict is to believe you are what you DNA, your birthplace, your country of origin declare you to be. Once you dare to believe you are something more than the sum of your past, you will find yourself buffeted by doubt, resistance and severe testing, for living as a son or daughter of God challenges the norms and values of any and every nation on the earth.

To be kind and considerate toward one another, to be sensitive to the “least of these,” to give generously, to provide hospitality to the stranger, to embrace the immigrant, is to live counter-culturally. To do so with humility rather than arrogant self-righteousness is incredibly demanding practice.

Believing the voice from heaven rather than the voices of our regions of origin requires repentance. We need to repent of our self-orientation, believing we are the center of the universe; to repent of our acquisitive habits, believing our security lies in having more than our neighbor; repent of our collusion with the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and advertising culture encourage, believing the material world can satisfy our heart's hunger.

Faith, born of repentance, lives with an awareness of a solid and durable joy discovered in the disciplines of self-forgetfulness that is quite different from the gratification of this or that impulse of the moment.

God longs to perfect and transfigure the divine image we bear, the image so long tarnished by our clinging to tribal identities, the image so long disfigured by our habitual "inhumanity." By repentance and faithful cooperation with God's grace we become fully awake, fully alive, fully human.

The good news is this: Christian faith is a true humanism.