

St James United Church



Message for August 23, 2026

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Baptized into Christ” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

For the last couple of weeks, I've been speaking about identity, both directly and indirectly, and today I'd like to offer a final reflection on the topic, not just because today's readings speak to it even more than previous weeks, but in response to Arthur's baptism, baptism all about identity, both as we honour the name someone's given, and affirm the identity that they share in Christ.

That identity informs the Matthew reading, especially as Jesus' asks his disciples who people say he is, and then asks the same of them. As we heard, Simon quickly affirmed his belief that Jesus is not only the messiah, the Christ, but also son of the living God, prompting Jesus to make an affirmation about Simon as Peter, as Rock, ironic given his impulsivity, at least until after Jesus' death, and he is gifted by the Spirit on Pentecost. Something to note in this is how people hold more than one identity. Jesus may nickname Simon as Peter but throughout the gospels he's often called both. Likewise, Jesus is affirmed as the Christ, also God's son, but never stops being Jesus, tied to his family, community, culture. We name this theologically when we say Jesus is fully human and fully divine. But it doesn't stop there. That doctrine is foundational to who we are spiritually, God's children through baptism, still us with our gifts and failings, yet the Spirit dwells within us through grace.

Both human and spiritual identities are at play in our Exodus reading as Amram and Jochebed's son is called Moses by Pharaoh's daughter because she drew him out of the water. This ends up as a spiritual identity when the one drawn out of water is empowered by God to lead his people out of slavery through water. Note that his living into this doesn't remove other identities, first as a Hebrew, something he clearly knows because he later reacts with anger, killing a taskmaster who abused a Hebrew slave, and an Egyptian, raised in the royal court, giving him knowledge to draw on when he later advocates for his people. And when he flees for his life, he adopts another identity, becoming a Midianite shepherd. These are all part of him as he works for God.

This is essential when we consider how we follow Jesus in our lives. When we are baptized, we are not just celebrating a social marker, a ceremony where in today's context Arthur is welcomed into the church as his parents and grandparents had been before him. That heritage is important, of course, just as Jesus' ties to his family or the identity Moses' parents nurtured in him before giving him up to be raised Egyptian were important. Arthur too will be raised by his parents and other family members, shaped by his experiences, growing into adulthood. But he has a spiritual heritage too, adopted as God's child, part of the Body of Christ, a living reality for him beyond

this morning, through the Spirit, sharing in Christ's identity and helping him to grow in holiness in his life, enabling him to be Christ's presence in the world. This means he will discern how to respond, what to bind and loose in varying situations as Jesus would, so he can make visible God's love and seek a more just world as Jesus did too. Arthur doesn't stop being Arthur in this. Through grace, he'll image Jesus in an Arthur way throughout his life. We all do the same.

And as we do, there are moments when we're tested in how to respond. This brings us back to the Exodus story, and not just to Moses, but a host of people: Moses' parents, his sister Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, each responding to a terrible situation when "a new king arose who did not know Joseph," that is a king arose who conveniently forgot the pivotal role Joseph played in saving the Egyptians to make it easier to demonize his descendants. There's a whiff of modern politics here we need to attend to. So, what did people do in the face of the grave injustices Pharaoh decreed? Sadly, most did as they were told, again giving a whiff of our world, hence Jochebed putting Moses in a little ark with Miriam to watch over him, and Pharaoh's daughter adopting him. Each move is risky. But before that we have the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, risking not just their livelihoods but their lives.

Their response reminds us to respond to injustices that we see in the world like they did. And like them who drew on their identities as midwives to help bring life into the world, not take it, we respond out of personal skills and based on our passions. That helps us offer our best and helps us keep going over the long haul. But here we again draw on our identity in Christ, by baptism his hands, his voice, his heart in the world. There's responsibility here. Taking on the identity of Christian means people will interpret Jesus' life by how we live. Our failure is one reason less people go to church. They've seen Christians and question what Jesus taught based on followers who do the opposite to him and project their agendas onto him. If we aren't sure what Jesus did, read again the disciples' response to his first question. People connected him to figures like John the Baptist or Jeremiah. Among various identities, Jesus was a prophet, comforting the challenged, and challenging the comfortable. If we are doing that, seeking a more compassionate and just world, we're on the right track. It's what Peter went on to do, finally the rock, no longer afraid to speak God's truth, to speak about God's love, and live it out.

Simon Peter could do that because he had a relationship with Jesus that he nurtured in prayer and acted out of that. There he was able to take to heart what Jesus says next as he called his disciples to carry the cross. A big part of that is learning to let go of ourselves, to die to our agendas so we can truly serve others, to realize our foundational identity is in God's love and so don't need to be attached to identities, statuses, the world gives, so we can align ourselves with those facing harm, even if risky. We do this on our own but also together as we worship, study, encourage each other, serve, respond to issues in the world, in other words, live out our baptism.

So, may we do just that. Our identity as followers of Jesus, as part of the Body of Christ, is to be his hands and voice, joined to him through the Spirit, but each of us in our own unique ways. Let us take that to heart, and encourage one another, encourage little Arthur to do the same. Amen.