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One of the elderly sisters in my religious community used to ask a younger sister that question every day at breakfast. The senior in question didn't have dementia. Far from it! She was challenging the other to continue to dig deeper and deeper into her own identity, to discover and articulate who she really was. The younger one started with her name and went on to other words which described the relationships that called her forth: sister, daughter, friend, etc. Some of the answers had an overtly religious tone while others could include anything from the claim to be a swimmer to a Cardinals' fan. As the days went on, it became quite a challenge to continue to respond with new, honest, creative answers – and a good number of us learned from watching the interchange.

Of course, part of the challenge we all picked up on is that you have to be capable of demonstrating the truth of any word you use to describe yourself. If you say you are a tennis player, you'd better at least know which end of the racket to pick up. Today, for instance, if you followed Paul's lead and said "I am member of the church," what evidence could you offer for that claim? Most of us were baptized as infants, and while we may have a certificate, legal as it may be, it's pretty flimsy evidence. In the Book of Genesis, the first question God asked humanity was "Where are you?" Like a pair of naughty children, Adam and Eve admitted they were hiding. From that

moment on, as Eucharist Prayer IV reminds us, God has continued to seek us out, sending prophets, again and again trying to entice us into a covenant of love.

Today's psalm response offers us a challenging mantra for the coming week. After the first reading we will repeat, "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will." Do we realize that when we pray those words we are claiming to be ready for anything that will come up in God's ongoing project for the universe?

One of the points of today's liturgy and readings is that God's offer of salvation has never been a disembodied proposal. God always chooses to work through creatures who reflect the divine image. When Isaiah heard God's question, "Whom should I send?" he responded with the same emotion as the psalmist: "Here I am! Send me!" Today's selection from the Book of Isaiah reflects on the prophetic vocation emphasizing that God's servants are called from the womb, and that they are always called for the sake of God's people.

As he begins his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul says much the same thing. Paul identifies himself as someone called by God, and he addresses himself to a community of people who share that same dignity and responsibility. The Gospel identifies Jesus as a person so imbued with God's Spirit that he will actually immerse other people in it.

While each of today's readings talks about vocation, giving us good theory, praying the psalm is the dangerous thing. When we pray those words we put our own lives on the line. Sure, it would be more comfortable to hide out with Adam behind some leafy bush, but this prayer calls us to join a great company of friends of God and respond with people like Abraham, Isaiah, Samuel and Mary of Nazareth, all of whom in their own way said with Mary, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord."

When we think about those biblical heroes and our own favorite saints, we recognize what became obvious in the interchange between my two sisters: our response to God and to the others who have called us forth ultimately shapes who we become. Each of the readings we hear this weekend reflects who God created us to be. The first reading reminds us that God called us before we were born. Paul tells us that our vocation is to take up our part in the community God has formed and sent forth for the sake of the world. The Gospel gives us John the Baptist as the model of a servant of God so dedicated that he could recognize God's chosen one and so humble that he could step aside when the time came.

Who are you?

That's the question this week's readings put to each of us individually and as a community that God has called together for the sake of the world. It's a question we need to ask again and again because the meaning of our lives depends on the answers we give. It is only to the extent that we can say who we are that we can also pray, "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will."

Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6

Our first reading today is from the second of Isaiah's "Songs of the Servant of the Lord." The *Dictionary of the Bible* (John L. Mackenzie, 1965) explains that when someone is called a "servant" of a king or of God, it's a title of great honor. It implies that the servant holds a high rank simply for being part of the entourage of the illustrious individual. But, Isaiah describes a servant who is countercultural, someone whose armament will be his tongue rather than a sword, who suffers in apparent weakness and whose victory can only be understood in the light of faith (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52). Scholars have long debated whether Isaiah's servant songs refer to a particular person like Moses or Jeremiah or, rather, to the nation as a whole. Christian Scripture authors interpreted Jesus through the lens of Isaiah's suffering servant.

What matters more than those historical debates is what the passage says to us today. This selection is open to two particular routes of interpretation. We can read it for the light it sheds on Jesus and his relationship to the Jewish tradition, and we can glean what it has to tell us about ourselves.

Reading this passage in relation to Jesus, we hear echoes of the recent Christmas season. From the moment of his conception, Jesus was uniquely Son of God, called from the womb to be God's messenger, to gather Israel into one as God's holy people once again. We hear strains of Jesus' enigmatic Last Discourse (John 17:5) in the promise "I am to be made glorious in the sight of the Lord." Similarly, "The Lord is my strength" echoes "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). Finally, it's hard to miss the connection between "His light was the light of the human race," (John 1:3) and "I will make you a light to the nations."

Moving from theory to practice, this reading urges us to see how each of those ideas played out in the life of Jesus. How did he struggle with his call to be God's servant?

(Think of the desert temptations and Luke's conclusion that the devil departed from him "*for a time.*") What was it that led Jesus to understand the cross as glory? (Contemplate the paradoxes of the Sermon on the Mount.) How can we see Jesus as a model for learning to rely on God as our strength? (What happened when he would go off by himself to pray?)

We might end our reflection by asking ourselves just what is entailed in being a servant of our Lord, Jesus: When was the last time I reflected on my vocational call, on what God hoped for from me before I was born? How recently have I chosen the sort of glory Jesus desired? How willing am I to rely on God? These questions help us determine whether or not we are on the path of living as baptized Christians or if we simply have a certificate that proves that we went through a washing ceremony before we were conscious of what it meant.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

The opening of Paul's letters is no insignificant matter. In writing his epistles he followed and added to the conventions of his day. He would begin by naming himself and those to whom the letter was directed. He would also use the opening lines to hint at what the body of the letter would say. While the address may seem simple, it is dense with implications.

To begin with the mundane background of this letter, scholars estimate it was written rather early, around the year 56 or 57, some five years after Paul had established the Corinthian community. The commercial city of Corinth had its share of just about everything in terms of wealth and poverty, religiosity of various stripes and licentiousness enough for any appetite. The social environment itself provided continual challenges to the Christian community. The economic diversity and variety of spiritualities among their membership added to the difficulties the community had to confront. In the face of that multiplicity, Paul began by calling the community to recognize who they were.

First, he identified himself as an apostle called by the will of God. That emphasized the fact that he was beholden to no community or individual but only to the One who called him. Naming himself an apostle was a rather audacious step; he was assuming the title most often reserved to designate a small group who had walked with Jesus. (Acts 14:14 refers to Paul and Barnabas as apostles, but other than that, only Paul expands the category to include himself.) Paul's self-designation as an

apostle explained why he believed he had the authority to write to the community as he did.

With his identity established, Paul turned to his readers. He called them the church of God in Corinth. The word *ekklesia* (church) simply refers to a gathering. Paul calls this gathering the church *of God*. This is no ordinary assembly or club; it's not like any voluntary association. This gathering has been established by God and belongs to God. Just as Paul was neither self-designated nor appointed by any human agency, this group was not constituted by any self-interest or autonomous purpose. It owes its communal existence exclusively to God. This means that the individual members are bound by their common call; they are more than a simple aggregate of individuals who look toward the same goal. They are called into communion.

Finally, Paul tells the community that they are called to be holy *with* those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. With that Paul asserted the catholicity of the church; each small community is called to unity with other churches in the same way that the individual members are called to communion in their local community.

Paul ends the salutation of his letter with a “wish-prayer” for grace and peace. The mercy and shalom of which he speaks are not simply from God. Instead, he specifies they are also *from the Lord, Jesus Christ*. We are so accustomed to that phrase that we don't realize how bold it was. That phrase distinguished the followers of Jesus from their Jewish brethren as well as from all other faith traditions. That phrase, so shocking to first century ears, brought the idea of Jesus' divinity into the common consciousness, and ongoing use led to its evolution into official dogma proclaiming Jesus' divinity and humanity.

John 1:29-34

When we meet John the Baptist in this reading he has already proclaimed that he was not the Messiah but the one preparing the way. The fourth Gospel is careful to present Jesus as distinct from and never subservient to John, even to the point of avoiding the mention of a personal encounter between the two. John simply appears as the forerunner of the one to come. At the same time, the Baptist describes his own faith experience regarding Jesus: “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove ...and remain upon him.” According to Scripture scholar Juan Matias (*El Evangelio de Juan*), John's description of that descent is like that of a dove seeking its own nest: John

saw the Spirit come home to rest in Jesus.

Because John recognized the Spirit's presence in Jesus, he called Jesus the Lamb of God. That title, so familiar to us, occurs only here in the Christian Scripture. The unique feature of the Baptist's phrase is that Jesus is the Lamb *of God*. As this Gospel describes it, John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus was always, "He must increase, I must decrease," and John's proclamation that Jesus came from God acknowledged that clearly. John recognized that his vocation was different from Jesus'.

While Jesus is the obvious subject of this selection, we might actually learn more about our vocation from John the Baptist. Outspoken and strong as he was, John knew and admitted his limitations. He said, "I did not know him," and yet, he dedicated his life "that he might be made known to Israel." That is a profound expression of humility. It presents John as a servant who knew what it meant to be an apostle. John was simply the one sent to open the way to more than he could imagine.

This week's readings lead us into the season of Ordinary Time with a reflection on who we are called to be as Christians. They remind us that being a Christian is never a solo performance. We are called together, formed by the word of God to become a light to the nations. Like John the Baptist, we are called not for ourselves, but to be able to point out the Lamb of God to others. When we know and accept that vocation, we can call ourselves the church of God in our own hometown and in our world.

Planning: 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Since Easter is relatively late this year (April 16), Ash Wednesday falls on March 1. That means that we have seven Sundays of winter Ordinary Time. This will give us more time than usual to prepare for Lent, but don't procrastinate. It's still less than two months away!

This part of Ordinary Time was once called the Sundays after Epiphany, and we can see connections with Epiphany themes in the readings assigned to many of these Sundays.

Today the first reading speaks of God showing his glory through God's servant and the call of that servant to be a light to the nations. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he links them with "all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours." The Gospel relates another manifestation of Jesus' identity at his baptism (once part of the Epiphany celebration).

Planners, therefore, should keep these epiphany themes in mind throughout these weeks; they can tie the weeks together by highlighting those themes in preaching, prayers and musical choices.

Of course, it is not enough just to remember how God's plan for salvation was revealed in ancient times. That same plan must be carried out today and proclaimed to those who do not yet understand God's great love for them and God's desire for unity among all people and harmony throughout creation.

Thus, these weeks also call us to carry on the mission that God entrusted to Jesus. Continuing the work of epiphany means embracing the ministry of evangelization. God's message is meant for all people, and sharing that message must continue until Christ is all in all.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: This year is the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, so the theme of the week this year is "Reconciliation — The Love of Christ Compels Us (2 Corinthians 5:14-20)." This would be a good year for Catholic parishes and Lutheran congregations to work together to prepare a joint prayer service for Christian unity. Find materials at:

www.geii.org/for_the_Week_for_Christian_Unity or
www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/weeks-prayer/doc/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20160531_week-prayer-2017_en.html

We might also broaden the theme beyond ecumenical relations. Our country and our world are in desperate need of reconciliation. There are so many divisions marked by hatred and violence, discrimination and terrorism. Reconciliation is not the work of a month or two; it is the ongoing mission of the church, carrying on the mission of Christ himself. Planners and preachers should regularly return to this theme, echoing God's call to us to be reconciled with God and with one another.

Prayers: 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today we hear titles given to Jesus, who is called the Son of God, the Lamb, and the true Servant who brings salvation to the whole world. His role is completely based on his relationship to God, whom he calls his Father. Our role is based on our relationship to Jesus, when we begin to know him as he is and what he is called to do. Like him, our task is to continually deepen the relationship that leads us to know who we are and what we are called to do. That noble work is never finished.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were made known by John, who did not even know you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were claimed by the Spirit as the Son of God: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you were sent to give yourself for us: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Our relationship to Jesus calls us to be in relationship to others, and so we pray for one another.

Minister For the whole church: that we may know who we are and what we are called to do ... we pray,

- For those called to teach us and our children: for pastors, catechists, theologians and ministers ... we pray,
- For the President of the United States, who will be inaugurated this week; and for unity ... we pray,
- For adoptive parents, who are committed to helping their children feel valued and loved ... we pray,
- For those whose lives are consumed with daily living or basic security, especially refugees, the poor and the marginalized ... we pray,
- For those whose commitment to Jesus is used as a weapon against others ... we pray,
- For those who continue the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to bring about racial unity ... we pray,

- For the sick, the dying and the grieving among us; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God, who showed us who Jesus is, we pray for eyes that are open to recognizing him and hearts that are open to following him. Help us to deepen our relationship to him and to one another for the sake of the whole world. We pray in the name of him who is called the Lamb of God. Amen.

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