Sunday, December 15, 2002
WHO ARE YOU?
I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

"Who are you?" That sounds like a strange question for the religious leaders of Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist. Maybe it was only a rhetorical question. Surely they knew who he was. He had been preaching to crowds who came to hear him in the wilderness. His fame had been spreading. Did they really think he was the Messiah? If they did, John told them plainly that he was not.

Next, they asked, "Are you Elijah?" Did his questioners believe in reincarnation? Elijah was a prophet who had lived hundreds of years earlier. Once more, John told them he was not Elijah. Then they asked again, "Who are you then? What do you say about yourself?"

John the Baptist replied, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord." Then he added, and now I'm paraphrasing, "I am a preparer of the way. I'm here to introduce you to God's love revealed totally in a human being."

Who are you? As you approach Christmas through Advent, I want to direct that question to each one of you listening to this sermon, "Who are you?" Or better still, during this season, I hope you will keep asking yourself, "Who am I?" In addition, I want you to ask yourself some additional questions. Here's why.

I remember many years ago, experts in early childhood development and education theorized that children, as they begin to develop and grow, ask three basic questions over and over again: Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like? Very young children are asking these questions instinctively long before they are able to put them into words. It forms the basic framework of their built-in curiosity.

I believe we human beings continue to ask these three questions throughout our lives and that we give different answers to them at various points in our life's journey. As you grow and mature, I am convinced that there is a fourth question you ask yourself: Why am I here?

Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like? Why am I here? I believe John the Baptist and Jesus both continued to ask these questions of themselves on their life's journeys. Later in his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples two additional questions: "What do you hear people saying about me, in other words, who do they think I am? And who do you say that I am?"

Who are you? How do you and others decide who you are? Do the negative hidden traits of your personality emerge during this season? Are they the real you? Do you become like the Grinch who stole Christmas? Do you become more depressed at the same time others are being more jovial and elated? Are you more crabby, stingy, and "Scrooge-like?" Do you find yourself over-indulging and over-spending? Do you find yourself rushing around and worrying excessively because there is so much to do? Do you think everything has to be perfect — your decorations, the cookies you baked, the perfect Christmas tree, the perfect Christmas open house, Christmas cards mailed on time? If you are one of several children in a family, do you find yourself comparing the value of your gifts with the value of the gifts that your sisters or brothers received? Who are you?

Hopefully, it's the hidden positive traits of your personality that emerge during this season, and they form the basis of the real you. You smile more. You are more kind and forgiving toward everyone you meet. You acknowledge the fact that things do not have to be perfect to be good. You are more relaxed. You are more generous. You are more thankful. You find yourself rejoicing at the good fortune of others rather than comparing what you have with what you think others have. You are more loving and caring. You look forward to being with friends and family. You do not lose your cool when you take the Christmas lights from last year out of storage and discover they no longer work, even though they were working when you put them away. I call that one of the "mysteries" of Christmas.

Who are you? It's a good question to ask of yourself as you approach Christmas because maybe it's the real "you" that emerges this season. If you don't like who you are during this season, or if others don't like the "you" that emerges, it's not too late to change.

Who are you? Here's the way to discover your true identity. I am convinced that the story of Advent and Christmas tells you who you are. What does it reveal? It tells you first of all that you are a child of God. You are created in God's image, and God made you good. Listen again to the first creation story in the book of Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them... And God saw everything he had made, and indeed it was very good."

This creation story is retold in the gospel of John's Christmas story. Here's my paraphrase: "In the beginning was the love of God and this love was with God and this love was God. All things were created through and because of the love of God. This same love of God became flesh, became a human being in the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem, and lived among us."

During this holy season, I invite you to remember and celebrate this same love of God, which has been born in each one of you because it forms the foundation of who you really are. This love of God, this Spirit of God, was there from the moment you took your first breath, and it is reborn in you over and over again. This love of God that is in the world and in you can never be eliminated. You can push it aside. You can ignore it. You can make believe it's not there. You can allow it to be covered up and hidden, but you can never get rid of it.

Phillip Brooks, in the fourth verse of his beautiful Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, expressed this truth when he wrote,
"O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray,
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel."

The Christmas story not only reminds you of who you are, but it also gives you new knowledge and a new experience of God, the Holy One. The Psalmist wrote: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." In the age that those words were written, it was the most radical, most startling thing anybody ever said about God. God's primary characteristic, God's essence, is steadfast love. In the ancient world, people didn't think or talk about God in those terms. The gods of many early religions were stern, angry, and vengeful.

Many people today still have that kind of image of God. Theologian and popular writer Philip Yancey wrote: "I grew up with the image of a mathematical God who weighed my good and

bad deeds on a scale and always found me wanting. Somehow I missed the God of the gospels, a God of mercy and generosity."

And so it has been for too many people who were taught or who imagined that God is only to be feared; that you never measure up to God's expectations; that God, in Anne Lamott's wonderful image, is like your high school principal going through your files and not liking what he finds there. It's where many people are all their lives — with a remote notion of God as judge, with a load of guilt left over from childhood and a life pattern of declining interest in the whole unpleasant religion business. How sad.

How sad to miss the whole point. How tragic to never hear the good news. And how blessed to finally hear, to be converted a second time, to fall in love this time around with a God whose essence is steadfast love.

It is the answer to your deepest need to know that you are loved and cared for unconditionally and steadfastly. That need is there from the beginning. From your infancy, you need to know the presence and touch and unconditional love of someone — a parent, a caregiver. It is in that way that you begin to awaken and to experience the love of God. Psychologists know that as soon as you are capable of experiencing anxiety, this is what you are anxious about. Who am I? Am I loved? It's another way of asking, do I have worth? If you don't have this experience of unconditional, steadfast love, you might come to the conclusion that you are something different from what you truly are. You could believe that you are unloved, therefore unworthy and no good. It gives you the wrong message as to who you are.

Who are you? This season tells you that you are loved. It tells you that you receive gifts every day that you did not earn, work for, or deserve. Christmas is about the amazing grace of God — to give you this gift of yourself, your life, the time of your life you have already been privileged to live, and the time you have left to live, however long that is. Christmas is about a God who wants you to know that your life has intention, and that apart from anything you have done or not done, the Creator wishes you well. Christmas is about a God who came into this world in the birth of an infant to let you know how profoundly you are loved.

Who are you? Who is God? The Christmas event gives you some answers to both questions, but mystery remains. You never know completely who you are, and you never know completely who God is. There is also a mystery to Christmas, and that's the beauty of it. The stories surrounding the event are filled with dreams, angels, visions, a young woman pregnant before she is married, shepherds seeing strange sights, wise men following a star. You can see why the gospel of Luke tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, wonders how all these things can be and what they mean. Later, Luke tells us that "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." She, like you and me, knows there is deep mystery here.

There is a mystery not only in the baby Jesus but in every baby, in every new life. That's why we human beings are so attracted to babies. You can look at a tiny baby in a crib and you can sense the mystery. If you have been the parent of a baby, you have stood at the crib and gazed at this new miracle for hours on end. What is our baby thinking? What will she be like when she grows up? Does she know who I am?

There is mystery all around you. The older you grow, the more mysterious life becomes. You might sometimes say to young people that when they grow up, they will know more, but that is only partially true. A person may know more as far as facts are concerned and may have

gained the wisdom of experience, but it's also true that an increasing experience of life only deepens the mystery. You begin to realize that there is so much more that you don't know.

My hope for you and for me during this holy season is that each one of you will discover again the "real you," the person created in God's image, the person God intends you to be, the person loved unconditionally by God, the good person you were meant to be. I also hope you will see every other human being you meet as being created in God's image.

Who are you? You are God's beloved child. Amen.