

Can any of us really imagine what it will be like when we actually stand in the presence of the Most Holy One? The Youth Ensemble has reminded us of this. For now, that is all we can do: imagine. We realize a day is coming when the imagination will be imagination no more. And that just happens to be the case with Paul Simon.

Four weeks ago today his funeral service was conducted on the campus of Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, a bit more than 100 miles northwest from where I was reared. I just happened to be doing the guy thing with the TV remote going from one channel to the next. C-SPAN caught my eye as a live feed was originating from SIU-Carbondale. It was the Memorial for Simon – not the singer who hooked up with Art Garfunkel back in the ‘60s, but the politician who served as a United States Senator from Illinois back in the late ‘70s into the early ‘90s. Some of you may remember his deep resonating voice and his trademark bow ties and dark conservative suits. He unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for President in 1988. He died on Tuesday, December 9 at age 76. He was eulogized at the service by a host of people from every piece of the political mosaic. He had abiding relationships with people on the right, the left, in the center, the front, and the back.

Simon was a person of faith in Jesus Christ. The son of Lutheran missionaries, he recognized the importance of following the teachings of Christ’s mandate in the New Testament. He sought to identify with Christ, acknowledging that he had failed miserably. He believed Christ was more interested in the issue of human neglect and poverty than people winning the lottery. Even the *Chicago Tribune*, which was, more often than not, critical of Simon’s politics, described him as “a quietly efficient champion of everything from literacy, hunger, foreign language instruction, and missing children’s programs to immigration, ethics, and budget reforms.”<sup>1</sup> Prior to his death I can only imagine what he was imagining, knowing that soon he would be, literally, in the Lord’s presence. There was no identity crisis in Paul Simon’s life. He knew his failures and sins; at the same time he knew he was a child of God, a believer in Jesus Christ.

I can only imagine what a tough-minded preacher, who stepped onto the religious landscape nearly 2,000 years ago, thought as people from all around came, perhaps out of curiosity, to hear him preach and watch him push people under the water who voluntarily had decided to be baptized as an evidence of their repentance.

To say the least, John, Zack and Lizzie’s boy, had turned out to be a pretty darn good preacher. He didn’t pastor a church. He didn’t have a pulpit to pound. He didn’t have a big genuine leather bound black Bible to wave around in the air. All he had was a voice – a voice with a message, crying in the wilderness. And did he ever use that voice. Why in one breath he could call people a bunch of snakes and in the next clearly tell them what they needed to do and then in the another breath humbly acknowledge that he wasn’t the Man, the Messiah that is. And the people to whom he was preaching needed to especially hear that last part.

They were in one of those identity crises. As they listened to him, they were probably asking some questions in their hearts like: “Aren’t we the people of God?” “Didn’t God, long ago, promise to send the Mighty One, a Messiah who would deliver us?” “Could it be that this guy is that Promised One from God?” Such were their hearts’ expectations. It had been a long, long time since anybody like John had showed up to preach the kind of message that he was preaching. When they heard him they couldn’t help but wonder if he was the Messiah for whom they were waiting.

Like Paul Simon, John was aware of his shortcomings. He quickly pointed out that there was no identity crisis here. Luke says he even declared that “*one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals*” (Luke 3:16b-c). He knew his identity as he continued to say, “*I baptize you with water*” (v.16b). “The One who is coming that’s more powerful than I, well,”

*“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 17).* On that particular day, the preacher at the Jordan affirmed, without delay, that there was no identity crisis here.

Now so you’ll know “identity crisis” is a legitimate term. Counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists use it. It can be found in most dictionaries. It refers to a state or condition of disorientation and role confusion that occurs, especially in teenagers, as a result of conflicting pressures and expectations. But you don’t have to be a teen to be disoriented and confused.

There are many persons from every age and station in life who find themselves in an identity crisis. A host a folks, maybe some of you, are asking questions like, “Who am I?” “What is my purpose?” “Where am I going?” “What is my life about?” To complicate matters, the same persons are also asking, “Who are you?” “What is your purpose?” “Where are you going?” “What’s your life about?” These questions may be asked in times of great tranquility when all is well and in times of great pandemonium when maybe all is not so well.

Twenty-two years ago this month, I was in my last semester of graduate study at Southern Seminary. I was sitting in my dorm room one wintry afternoon after class with a dear friend, Bill Fort, watching M\*A\*S\*H. I don’t think I’ve ever told you that I’m a M\*A\*S\*H fanatic. What happened that afternoon was one of those “where you were when President Kennedy was shot” or “when the Twin Towers of the New York Trade Center fell” kind of experiences.

It was Wednesday, January 13, 1982. M\*A\*S\*H that cold day in Louisville was interrupted. There had been a plane crash in Washington, DC. An Air Florida jetliner had gone down into the Potomac River, shortly after take-off. Bill and I watched intensely as rescue workers were lifting a few passengers from the wreckage, barely under those icy waters, in blizzard like conditions.

One person was so weaken from the crash and cold that she didn’t have the strength to hang on to the harness from a helicopter pulling people to safety. She released the rope and fell back into the cold water. A second attempt was made. She released again from fatigue. The second time, she did not emerge from the water. I remember tears filling my eyes as I thought, “I just watched this woman die.” Bill turned to me with watery eyes and said, “Jimmy she’s going to drown.” We watched in horror at what we thought was about to happen. But then, a rescuer on the bank jumped into the water and pulled her to safety, as she was not too far from the bank. She lived as result of that heroic act. I watched President Regan later recognize this DC firefighter in the balcony of the House Chamber during his State of the Union Address later in the month.

There were 79 people on that flight and only five of them survived – one being this woman. She owed her life to this fellow who jumped into the water and pulled her out. But she, as well as the other four, also owed it to a person whom rescuers came to call, “The Sixth Man.” Bill and I commented that there was obviously someone in the water, helping people grab the rope. Later we learned that rescuers noted that the rope from the helicopter came to him over and over again, but he passed it on to the other five as they hung on for life, floating on debris in the frozen water. By the time the helicopter returned for the sixth man, he had slipped beneath the icy surface and drowned.

The pilot in the helicopter later remarked, “Imagine! He had just survived that horrible crash. The river was ice-cold, and each minute brought him closer to death . . . He could have gone on the first trip but he put everyone else ahead of himself.”<sup>2</sup> He did what he could to save others and in the process lost his own life. The sixth man obviously didn’t have an identity crisis, did he? He did what he had to do. I believe, however, he did what he wanted to do.

John had to preach what he did and baptize the way he did; but I think he wanted to do what he did. It wasn’t that he wanted to see people perish; he wanted to see them get ready and know who they were when One would soon show up and do some preaching of His own and some baptizing of His own – baptizing with power. John knew who He was and his desire was for those gathered at the Jordan or

wherever to know whom they were. All of them, in the spirit of Isaiah 43, were the redeemed people of God. God had even called them by name; yet they had not heard Him.

The text Ellen read assumed a setting some time during the Babylonian captivity some six centuries before John appeared preaching and baptizing. Talk about an identity crisis. Those people, back in Isaiah's time, who were held in bondage by those barbarians to the east, probably acknowledged many times while in that strange land that there was an identity crisis here. Those folks were demoralized and so the great prophet of old in Isaiah reminded them about their identity. They could go through the most gruesome of circumstances – situations that were overwhelming – and still experience the power and presence of God, their Savior. They were precious in God's sight. He loved them. He honored them. He was with them.

In our quest to figure out who we are we sometimes forget that this God has also identified with us in our own downhearted situations. That is essentially the message the Baptizer preached. "Why are you living the way you live?" he said. "You are God's people. You are the redeemed folks. You are precious. He has even honored you. Yet, you live as if you aren't God's people and so your lives are filled with one identity crisis after another."

I ask us. Do we have an identity crisis here? There are folks inside and outside the church that've said to me, "The problem with Tabernacle is that there are two churches here." I always respond: "What's the name of the second church?" What there is here is a lot of diversity. Now I must come clean and tell you that I haven't checked with any of you inside the church and anyone outside the church about this diversity thing. So forgive me. I do have to tell you, though, that the last time I checked with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Paul, and Mary, James, Jude, and Apollos – I think Apollos wrote the book of Hebrews – the church is supposed to be diverse. Now those people who suggest there are two churches here are infuriated when I ask that question, "What's the name of the second church?" because deep down they know their observation is flawed.

Last year someone in our community said to me, "You're never going to be able to do much of anything at Tabernacle until you decide who you are at Tabernacle." I responded, "Why don't you know? We've already decided." He said, "Really? How so?" I said, "We have decided to follow Jesus. We've decided that we are God's people. We've decided we're believers in Jesus Christ who've made the unique confession, 'Jesus Is Lord' in the waters of baptism. We've decided that we're the redeemed people of God who will utilize any means that is biblically and theologically, as well as morally and ethically, appropriate to make a difference in this world by sharing the Gospel of Jesus of Christ anywhere and with anybody, anytime through the creativity of the Holy Spirit who has gifted each brother and sister for service in the Lord's local church called Tabernacle Baptist Church. We've decided we'll follow Jesus." I concluded, "No identity crisis here! We're all baptized believers." The person looked at me and then said, "You're right. Forgive me. You have decided who you are and there really are some wonderful things happening through Tabernacle Baptist Church."

Whenever we remember that we are baptized people, then there's no identity crisis here. Our baptism, our confession of faith, is what binds us to each other. That, perhaps, is partly why the One more powerful than John, that One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and power, was, Himself, baptized. Luke is very brief in his account of Jesus' baptism when compared with Matthew's or Mark's. One thing that rings clearly from Luke's account, though, is that Jesus' baptism by John set Him apart, identifying Him as belonging to God. In essence God said to Jesus, "You're mine. You belong to me." The same is true for us. In each baptism God says, "You're mine. You belong to me. I have redeemed you." Our confession, which really takes place in baptism, says "This is who you are. So don't forget."

My Uncle Tom died in September 1980. I conducted his internment back in Trigg County. I saw him for the last time about a month before he departed this life for the Life Everlasting in the presence of Christ. He was a good and Christ-like person, faithful to the Oak Grove Baptist Church, of which he was a member for more than 65 years. He was one of the few persons I've known who was a veteran of World War I, having fought in France in 1917. At the hospital, where I saw him last, we both knew this

would be our last earthly gathering. After some conversation and recollections, I had prayer with him. We embraced and said our good-byes. As I was making my way out, he called my full name – James Fisk Gentry, Jr. I turned and looked at him. He said, “Your daddy, my brother, would be proud. I sure am. Don’t ever forget who you are. Don’t ever forget who you are.”

Some day, our faith will become sight like that of Tom Gentry’s and John the Baptizer’s and Paul Simon’s. For the time being all we can really do is only imagine what that will be like. Since all you can do is only imagine, as you await that moment sisters and brothers, don’t forget who you are. You, we are the baptized people of God. The redeemed of the Lord. We stand in the great tradition of Isaiah the Prophet and John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ, the very Beloved Son of God, who lived and died and was resurrected and is coming again, so you, so we can imagine. That tradition continues through the saints of the ages, including Paul Simon, Tom Gentry, you, and me. Remember that every day and there’ll be no identity crisis here ever. I mean never. So what are you remembering today? Well?

### **Pastoral Blessing**

Depart, now, with abiding confidence in God, your Heavenly Father, the One in Whom you have believed. And as you go, remember:

You came to worship and bow down in His presence, thus finding, again, purpose for your life.

As you continue to seek an undivided heart, be assured that you will know the unity that is created by the Holy Spirit, through whom your identity is marked.

And in the strength of that same Spirit, go and praise Him – even Jesus Christ your Lord – praise Him now and forevermore! Amen & Amen.

**As preached by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
Tabernacle Baptist Church  
Carrollton, Georgia**

**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989.**

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<sup>1</sup>John M. Buchanan, “Paul Simon (1928-2003),” The Christian Century 120 (December 27, 2003) 26, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>David L. Van Arsdale, “Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Faith,” Homiletics 16 (January 2004) 1, p. 13.