

The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 15, 2024  
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 116:1-8,  
James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

## Who Do You Say that I Am?

Jesus is traveling with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi in northern Israel. He's taking the pulse of the people, so to speak, seeing what the word is on him out on the street. Many people have now heard his words of wisdom, challenge, and hope, and have seen the miracles, his works of mercy, of healing, of restoration. So he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answer, "some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and then others say one of the prophets." That is all well and good- and then he asks THE question of them; "But who do *you* say that I am'? And of course the impetuous Peter, always saying what is on his mind, wanting to be first, promptly answers him, "You are the Messiah." Bingo, he got it. And Jesus sternly asks them not to tell anyone. And then he immediately launches into what is known as the passion prediction, and he teaches them that he must undergo suffering, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter is horrified, and even pulls Jesus aside to rebuke him. Peter believes that this just

*can't* be, that can't happen to God's Messiah! But then Jesus whirls around and looks at them all and rebukes Peter, saying the shocking words "Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things," Wow, Peter has gone from being the star pupil to the one who is gravely mistaken in such a short time! And Jesus is calling him Satan!

Jesus is hoping that his disciples will understand his growing conviction about his mission and ministry. Now he fears that Peter anyway, and probably others, have gotten it wrong. Perhaps they think that he is to be the political savior, the avenger, the destroyer of the hated Romans, the one who would be king and restore Israel to what they believed was its rightful place among nations. Perhaps he knows that they will try to make him the ruler of this world, when, in fact, his reign is something new, and more wonderful, a reign of healing, of salvation, of redemption, of restoration of right relationship with God and neighbor. And in his rebuke, Jesus is not saying that Peter is evil, or a devil. Satan is a Hebrew word that means "accuser" or "adversary". It comes from a verb that means to obstruct or oppose. That makes sense

in this context. Here, Jesus is saying that Peter's idea of how Jesus' messiahship should unfold are adverse to God's way, that he is following his own limited understanding and perspective instead of "setting his mind on divine things" and listening to the still small voice of the Spirit.

And so the question echoes down through the ages, right into our own day and time. **Who** do you say that I am?, and **Who do you** say that I am? These are questions that no one can answer for us; each person must answer for himself. Pat answers can't just be passed down. Everyone must reflect, live into the question, and respond in faith. Who is this Jesus, whom we call Lord, Savior, Christ, Word made flesh? Who is he for us? Is he a wise teacher, whose words inspire us as we try to live a good life, to follow the commandments? Is he a prophet who cries out that justice be done in God's world? Is he the God-man whose divinity we worship, whose humanness is sometimes overshadowed by emphasis on that divinity? Is he the one we want to conquer and judge the world, upon whom we project our desire to be on top, the chosen ones, to the exclusion of others? Or is he the Divine one who also fully shares our human nature, who comes for love alone, to draw us back to

the God who has loved us from the beginning, who longs for us to reconciled to him and to each other? Might he be the one whose death heals us and shows us that there is nothing that can separate us from God, not our sins, doubts, our fears, not even death itself? Who do we say he is, Church?

And Jesus tells us what the cost of following him really is. We must deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow. We are not following Jesus just for the comfort and solace he provides. We are on mission, we are to live and love as he did. We are to turn from our orientation to our own desires, our own will, our own limited perspective and vision of life, and allow God's way to live in us, to fill our hearts. This feels like death, like letting go of everything familiar and comfortable, and traveling an unknown path. But we can take heart, because this way will lead to life and peace.

Take up your cross and follow me. Taking up the cross is more than being willing to undergo suffering for the sake of the Gospel, or denying our selves. It is the way of life, hope and peace! The way of the cross is the way of Jesus, who loved the world so much that he was

willing to die for the truth that was in him, for his mission to reveal the gracious reign of God. The cross shows us that God will stop at nothing to reach us, to bring us home, to fill us with his grace and unconditional love. The way of the cross is the way of compassion, love, of the willingness to surrender our lives to the living Christ, and in surrendering, find a new freedom that will let us soar on the wings of eagles, to run and never be weary. When Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross, he embraced the world. So when we walk the way of the cross, we too, seek to extend our hearts in love to the stranger, to the sojourner, even to our enemy as we become part of God's mission to reconcile the world to himself!

The paradox is that if we want to save our life, we will lose it. That's really how life works. If we cling so tightly to our life in this world, and seek to hoard it, to control it, to fearfully protect it, and in so doing shut ourselves off from God and our neighbors, we will lose it in the end. As Benjamin Franklin famously said "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle." Trying to live on our own terms diminishes us, because being cut off from our life in God and in

community with our brothers and sisters causes us to wither and languish.

And, those who lose their life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the Gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? So for those who accept their life as a gift from God, and don't cling to it, but instead offer it back in gratitude service, joy, and celebration, will save it. They will receive life in abundance, and their cup will overflow. Those who offer their lives to God in gratitude and faith will join in the dance of grace, of compassion, of eternal life that begins in the here and now.

When I think about losing our lives to save them, I am reminded of a verse from one of my favorite hymns, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." It goes like this: "finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be, let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee: Changed from glory, into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, joy and praise. This, friends, is losing our lives to save them. In following the way of Jesus,

the way of the cross, in the midst of our ordinary lives, we are changed into a glorious new creation, and our lives are lost in wonder love and praise, now and forever. Amen.