

Who Do You Say I Am?

Luke 9:18-20

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There are certain questions that are so profound we can't afford to duck them. They have a way of poking us and prodding us until we respond to them faithfully. Some of these questions have a once-for-all answer, but some have answers that evolve and change according to our life experience.

I think of Cain's question to God: Am I my brother's keeper?

I think of Peter's question: How many times must I forgive my neighbor, as many as seven times?

I think of Pontius Pilate's question: What is truth?

I think of Sarah's question: Is anything too wonderful for God?

In the text for today, it is Jesus who raises the question. It may be the most pivotal question in all of Scripture. It's actually a follow-up question. The previous question had been, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Peter answered: Some say you are Elijah; some say John the Baptist; some say you are an ancient prophet brought back to life.

Then comes the zinger: But who do YOU say I am? This is the question that echoes down through all the ages and generations. This is where Jesus says to each of us,

'I don't really care what others are saying about me. I care what you have to say about me.' Peter responds without missing a beat: **The Messiah of God.**

"You are the Messiah of God." That was Peter's language for naming Jesus' identity.

The Confirmation year can be described as a year for discovering language for naming our encounters with the sacred, for naming how we experience God, for finding the metaphors that have meaning to us, personally. So Jesus poses one of those questions we can not duck: who do YOU say I am?

I am going to place myself in Peter's shoes now, and I am going to give you my answer to the question. This I do, not so much because I want you to know my answer, but because I hope my answer will stimulate you to answer the question for yourself.

Who do you say I am? First, I say Jesus is the One who came into the world with a radical demonstration of what it means to love. Wherever he loved, people found wholeness that had been elusive before. A blind man found his sight; a woman with an issue of blood found healing. A tax collector climbed down from a sycamore tree and turned his life around. A child found self-worth. A powerful leader discovered real power lies in humility. Wherever Jesus demonstrated the power of love, lives were absolutely transformed. After Easter, when Jesus met up with the disciples on the beach, he said to them three times: feed my lambs. I take that to mean: love as I have loved. I see Jesus as the One who turned the world upside down by loving people in ways the world had never known. I see Jesus as the One who looks us in the eye and commands: love as I have loved.

Who do you say I am? Secondly, I say Jesus is the Redeemer of the world. A redeemer is someone who takes something that's lost its worth and restores it to something that has lasting value.

There is a story from Philadelphia during the Depression Era known as the Rag Man. At that time, there was a man who pushed his cart through the streets of the city calling out, "Rags! Rags! New rags for old; rags, rags!" And people would surrender to him all their old, oily, soiled, dirty rags. He'd exchange them for new

clean ones. Every week he'd come by with his cart exchanging the old, used ones for fresh ones. One day, a resident decided to follow the Rag Man to see where he went and to witness how he restored those old rags. Looking through a basement window, he watched the Rag Man scrub those old rags with detergent and with muscle power and with hot water. Then he watched as the Rag Man hung the rags on a line to dry and then iron each one with great care. There they were...old, useless rags...redeemed!

So, I think of Jesus as the Rag Man, as the One who receives all those aspects of our lives that seem to be worthless: our fears, our faults, our failures, and gives us instead what we really value: self-worth, a believing heart, a clear purpose, an unbounded joy!

Who do you say I am? Thirdly, I say Jesus is the one who takes the sting out of death. I actually believe all those Resurrection stories in the Bible. I believe the Easter stories embody a truth that affirms death does not have the last word. I remember the years in my life when I was absolutely afraid to die. What I remember is that I wasn't really alive. Fearing death, I took no risks; I stayed in my comfort zone; I hoarded my money; I was stingy with forgiveness; I just didn't have any abundance in my life.

When I began to take the Resurrection stories seriously, my fear of death diminished, and my zeal for living life fully exploded like Ginger Ale swooshing out of a bottle that somebody had shaken up. I didn't suddenly become reckless or irresponsible. I didn't court death. I became alive in the way a butterfly becomes alive in breaking out of a cocoon. I became alive in the way an idea becomes alive when a poet gets her hands on it. I became alive in the way notes on a musical score come to life when a flutist or a saxophonist or a pianist play their instruments.

Who do you say I am? I say Jesus is the One who sets me free from the paralyzing grip a fear of death can hold on me. Don't get me wrong! I'm not big on death. I hope to live to be 103. What Jesus teaches me is the secret to abundant living is letting go of the fear that death might be the end.

The life of faith is full of nagging questions. Some of them we can duck; some we have to address sooner or later. For today, the invitation is to place ourselves in Peter's shoes and hear Jesus saying, 'I really don't care what the crowd is saying about me. I do care who YOU say I am?' This is the question I wanted to raise up today for the whole church, in the greatest of hope. Amen.