

24th Sunday after Pentecost

September 16, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 8: 27-38)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for 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? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm starting this morning with a little dramatic effect. (Lights switched off.) It's a dramatic effect, and now I hope I can still see my sermon. All of us come to see Jesus in different ways. Sometimes there is that dramatic moment, the "aha," when the lights come on. (Lights come on.) In an instant, we know God is real. We know that God is here. People look back on those moments and know what it felt like to have that inspiration. They can say, "In that place, on that day, I knew." They often yearn to have that kind of feeling again.

But sometimes faith leaves just as suddenly. (Lights switched off.) A loss, a confrontation, an insight, and suddenly faith is gone. God is silent. “I just can’t believe this anymore.”

But for most of us (gradual lightening), faith comes slowly over time. Learning, experience, the growth of a childhood faith, the slow struggle to awaken an adult faith, the ups and downs, the back and forth, the gradual brightening of a long darkness. Or, in the other direction, a long fade from clarity into doubt.

This morning, Peter’s confession may seem like the switch was flipped, and suddenly he knew. “This is Messiah!” It seems like it came in an instant. But I wonder. I wonder if perhaps this has been growing in him for a long time as he listened and learned, as he saw miracles happen, as he talked with Jesus. Maybe this was a growing realization, and he was trying out those words for the very first time. “*You are Messiah.*” What I can’t figure out is, why does Peter choose “Messiah” to describe Jesus? Why that?

If you remember, this story starts in Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi, a thoroughly Greek city, with temples to a series of Greek gods – including the temple to the goat dance. I love that about Caesarea Philippi. The goat dance. In the midst of this “god fest,” Jesus asks, “*Who do people say that I am?*” “What’s the word on the street?” It’s an easy question. Nobody really has to think, they just have to report what they’ve heard. Some say John the Baptist; some say Elijah; some say a prophet. Notice there is no hint of “messiah” here. It’s not an image that the commentators are floating. It didn’t come off the opinion page of the *New York Times*.

Jesus says nothing to confirm or deny anything they say. Instead, he turns to the disciples and says, “*Who do you think that I am?*” And I imagine it is getting very quite. Peter looks up and tries out this new and wider idea. “*You’re the Messiah,*” he said.

Why does Peter say “Messiah”? He could have said so many other things. Think about it. Peter could have said, “Jesus, you are the one who said, ‘follow me,’ and you changed my life.” Peter could have said, “You’re the one that took me to the top of a mountain and showed me what God looks like.” He could have said, “You’re the one who invited me to get out of the boat and walk on the water. And you are the one who pulled me up when I lost my nerve.” Peter could have said, “Jesus, you’re the one who handed me a little bread and told me to feed thousands, and I found that I could.” Peter could have said, “You’re the one who has seen my failures and my dreams, and you have been totally honest with me.”

Why does he say “Messiah”? What would you say if you were given the chance? “Jesus, you are” what?

Steve Garnass-Holmes, a poet who writes each week on the lectionary, offered some names for Jesus.

He said, “Jesus is God’s best selfie, and humanity’s true DNA. Jesus is God’s fragile hope, set loose in the world. God’s vulnerability surviving among us. The living wound of the Beloved.”

He said, “Jesus is my wizard, my teacher, my elder, my big brother and little sister, my comrade, my jokester, my troublemaker, my trickster. Jesus is my healer, my lover, my peace, and not mine. Jesus is my possibility. The flavor of God. Infinite mystery in an old shirt. Jesus is the coach who expects too much of me, and is never disappointed. Jesus pushes me out of the uncomfortable places, and pulls me into them. Jesus invites me into the world’s wounds deep enough to find the light. Jesus is always dying, so I get the hang of it, and rising.”

“Who would you say that I am?” It’s a question for a lifetime. It tells the story of a lifetime, of a gradual brightening, or a slow fade.

I remember as a kid when Jesus was the hero of every Bible story – the healer, the one who feeds, the one with all the right answers, the resurrection! As a teen, Jesus became the friend I could talk to when there wasn’t anybody else. He also became the one you get to sing about in camp songs. As I grew, Jesus became more of a mystery. Especially in seminary, where everything I used to believe got challenged or torn apart. Then Jesus became the black hole, sucking away the light; purveyor of doubts, and questions, and unknowable mystery.

Later I discovered Saint Julian of Norwich, a Thirteenth Century mystic, that talks about Jesus as “mother” – and somehow I understood that. Love was like this. Jesus was like this. And I was on the way again, following other ideas for other days. Today I’m beginning to open up to John’s gospel, when it speaks of Jesus as wisdom. The mentor. The one who makes sense of life; the one who gives us future.

What have you known Jesus to be? Who is Jesus to you now? We all know and we don’t know. And we never know completely. It’s a question we live with in gradual brightening, or slow fade. There are so many answers; rich, beautiful, inspiring answers.

So, I wonder. Why does Peter choose “Messiah”? In fact, to that point Jesus had done nothing messiah-like. But if you look back over time, the word “messiah” originated in reference to kings. “Messiah” is the Latin version. “Meshiach” is the Hebrew. “Christ” is the Greek. They all mean the same thing. “Anointed one.” “Chosen for a purpose.” Kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. Priests were anointed when they were ordained. It was for anyone set apart for God’s purposes. “The anointed one.”

Later the word came to mean “future king,” the one who would come and make everything right again. The one who would restore the kingdom of Israel and usher in an era of peace. The ideal time of complete abundance and perfect peace.

Peter calls Jesus “Messiah.” Why does Peter call Jesus “Messiah”? Jesus is a peasant. He’s not a king. He’s a wandering rabbi with no political aspirations. He has done nothing messiah-like up to this point.

On the other side of the resurrection, we know it means a different thing, but back then Jesus didn’t look like a messiah. It’s an odd thing for Peter to say, “*You are Messiah.*”

It’s as if the light started to burn in a different way. His faith grew a little bit more insightful. And Peter knew something he hadn’t known before. He knew that Jesus is more mysterious and more far-reaching than he ever imagined.

As we know, the light soon dimmed. It took about two verses for Peter to misunderstand and try to make Jesus into something small and controllable again. But, for just a moment, we see the possibility of faith. Peter saw something new. And even after he was confused and called down – called Satan, for crying out loud – even when Peter can’t understand who Jesus really is, he is still willing to follow.

Can we follow a God who is more than we can understand or control? Can we give our lives to a God who will do more than make me a good person, or support me when I’m in need? In the flash of an instant, Peter sees a God of infinite possibility, infinite abundance, infinite mercy, who is intimately connected with this world. A God who is doing more than we can fully understand.

We are still learning, we are still growing, because there is so much more to Jesus than we know. So the real question becomes: Can we continue to trust this Jesus as we learn and grow and know more about the infinite?

“*Who do you say that I am?*” is the question of a lifetime. We will learn, we will see. The lights will gradually brighten, or slowly fade, or pop on all at once. There will be flashes of Spirit-inspired insight. But in all of it, can we, like Peter, be willing to follow Jesus?

Amen.