

Gospel - Mathew 16: 13-20

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Who Do You Say That I Am? A Meditation on Matthew 16:13-20

By Cathy Warner

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Jesus asks his closest followers, meaning, “Who do people think I am?”

And the disciples answer with a list of prophets that people speculate have returned from the dead—John the Baptist whose been dead only a short while, or Elijah, Jeremiah, or others...great leaders of the faith who have returned to set the people free from Roman oppression.

Ordinary people recognize there’s something powerful about Jesus, but they don’t yet understand it. His true identity hasn’t yet been revealed. And right now, he wants to keep it that way—a bit like the reluctant superhero not yet ready to abandon the cloak of relative anonymity their humanity affords them.

Jesus knows that things are going to get chaotic and ugly once the masses begin claiming he’s the messiah, that he will become a threat to the state and a target to be silenced.

The crackdown and violence will happen soon enough, but in this moment, Jesus wants to know if his disciples have any greater understanding than the speculation floating among the townsfolk, asking the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter is the one to blurt out the answer. The same eager Peter who jumped out of the boat to follow Jesus across the water and began to sink once he realized the craziness of his actions. The same Peter who will swear undying loyalty to Jesus, but will deny even knowing him after his arrest.

But in this moment, Peter’s hand is in the air, ready to blurt an answer. Perhaps he gives voice to what all the disciples are intuiting, or perhaps he’s speaking from an inner knowing gifted only to him.

“You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God,” Peter answers.

The son of the Living God—or as I remember Fr. Steve once saying in a sermon, “the still speaking God.” Jesus is not a returned prophet from a God who lived and spoke earlier and is recycling messengers. Jesus is a child of God still creating, still active in the world, still speaking, crying out for justice, peace, healing, and reconciliation.

Jesus responds with an “attaboy,” a gold star for the right answer. “Blessed are you!” Peter understands in a flash of insight revealed not by what he can see in the person of Jesus standing in front of him, but by what he can understand from the spirit of God revealing God’s own self through the incarnation. Jesus truly is God with us

Not only does Peter name Jesus, revealing his truest identity; but Jesus names Peter, revealing Peter’s identity.... He is no longer simply Simon, son of Jonah, he’s Peter— *petros*—a rock, solid, dependable, maybe even a little dense—and Jesus tells his friend and follower, that he’s going to use him to build a church—*petras*—a community. From Peter the *petros* comes the community *petras* that will never die—those gates of Hades could not contain Jesus and they can’t contain the community formed in Jesus’s name.

This gospel reading nagged at me like a popcorn hull stuck in a back molar all week as I chewed hard on other food. I learned Tuesday night that my home of 25 years, Boulder Creek in the beautiful redwoods of California’s Santa Cruz Mountains, was being evacuated due to wildfires. Through the week, I’ve been tracking the growth of this complex, one of many in the state, as 64,000 people were evacuated, as 63,000+ acres burned, as hundreds of homes were destroyed, as containment reached only 5% by last night with more dry lightning strikes expected in the coming days.

I’ve been watching twice daily press briefings, learning about woefully inadequate personnel and resources fighting historic conditions, working 24 hour shifts, of residents who won’t evacuate hampering efforts as they attempt to save their homes. I’ve been zooming in on heat maps and scanning social media pages trying to find out if either of my sisters-in-law will have homes to return to, or if my sister’s rented cabin will remain standing.

I’ve seen footage of fires burning doors away from my family’s homes, and heard from dear friends who know they’ve lost their own. The news is grim; and I keep “doom scrolling” through social media finding out everything I can about the devastation, as if knowing the facts will either prevent the worst from happening, or help me resign myself to the fact that the worst has already happened.

I cook dinner blinking back tears, fold laundry with a lump in my throat, mend clothes and pull weeds as though movement will keep grief at bay. Through all of this, in the back of mind, in the back of my teeth, this gospel has been niggling as I remember it’s my Sunday to speak the message.

It was hard to embrace this gospel lesson when I was filled with anxiety over the fire, and just as I began to try and wrestle a blessing from these words yesterday afternoon, my husband received word one of his sisters, Debbie—the Debbie on our prayer list suffering with multiple myeloma cancer— was critically ill and being rushed to the ER. This on top of being evacuated.

My husband, who is her medical power of attorney, as well as beloved brother, flew to her side last night for what will probably be goodbye. After I helped pack his suitcase, I paced the house, ask myself how I could offer a message of hope, of comfort, even of challenge, when I’m not feeling hopeful, or comforted, when I’m feeling way too challenged?

I called Fr. Steve and told him my predicament. That I might not be able to speak if the worst happened overnight. He said he had my back, and also that my experience might just be what needed to be shared from the pulpit. As we talked, I thought about how he and Patti who stood here week after week in March, April, May, and June, in the throes of the pandemic shut-down and Black Lives Matter protests, while the rest of us sheltered at home. Every week they reached deep into our collective fear and anxiety and mined the gospel lessons for connections to our situation. They wrestled with the gospel, and found in it a blessing that offered all of us sustenance as they preached.

That's the thing about preparing a sermon. The process impacts the preacher more than the congregation. It forces the preacher to grapple with the gospel when she or he would rather just skim it and move onto something else. It forces the preacher—today let's just call her me—to find a bigger context for my experience, to move beyond the narrow focus of me, and my pain, my worry, my interests, my activities, my joys and passions, and to think about the bigger story of life—the current and historical story of all lives—that God is ever-present in.

When I finally sat down with my computer, and began to do more than pick at the gospel passage as if it were an irritating hull in my teeth, I found myself wanting to pick up this passage and plunk the whole thing down right in the middle of life today, regardless of historic and cultural context. I didn't want to delve into the time and the place and the significance of what was happening then. I wanted to apply this gospel passage to life this very minute. To my life this very minute, chock full of fear, anxiety, and grief. And in doing so, it's going to thud down right in the middle of your life, too—alongside whatever personal concerns are weighing you down, or buoying you up.

Now that it's here; what can this gospel passage mean for us?

From where we stand more than 2000 years on this side of the resurrection, we'd never confuse Jesus with Elijah or Jeremiah, or John the Baptist.

But who do we say that Jesus is?

Fr. James Martin asked that question on a Facebook Bible study Friday, and the answers flooded in. Jesus as savior, teacher, brother, friend. One person wrote that Jesus is “the connective tissue binding us all together.” Another that, “Jesus is everything and more than everything. As close as my breath, and still impossible to grasp.”

That's who people say the son of man is; and that's the answer to the first question Jesus asks in this passage.

But, what about the second question he posed to his disciples. “Who do you say that I am?” If he asked you, who would you say Jesus is?

Before I offer my answer to that question, I want to continue with the dialogue, with Jesus giving a new name and identity to Simon son of Jonah. And ask, “What name and identity would Jesus bestow upon you? Who would Jesus say that You are? “

When I think about what he said to Peter, I know Jesus answers similarly when naming us. Jesus sees beyond our stumbles, and fumbles, beyond our rock-headedness, beyond our overzealousness, or our burnout, beyond lack of commitment, beyond fear, anxiety, grief, and further than circumstances that can derail us.

Jesus sees to the core of who we can be, he sees the spiritual gifts and character traits that God has bestowed upon us, he names the impact we can have on another person when we align our lives with God's purposes.

Jesus sees me as more than a woman who inhales information like junk food, who craves order and control in order to keep the worst case scenario at bay. He sees my heart, my desire to honor creation, and to create in response to God's love.

"Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah," Jesus says. "With you, I will build a community."

"Blessed are you," he says to each of calling us by name. Reminding us of our origins and speaking what we are capable of in Jesus' name.

Blessed are you. Blessed am I. Blessed are we. We are the rocks Jesus's church is built upon. The community that cannot be destroyed by death. The eternal Body of Christ.

And Who do I say that Jesus is?

Always, my answer is, the one who is present with us in all circumstances.

In this moment, I see Jesus sitting on the ends of hospital beds in the rooms of those suffering and dying. Holding the hands of those who are alone when they should be surrounded with family and friends, Jesus kisses brows and whisperis words of love. "I am with you," he says.

In this moment, I see Jesus standing amid ash and embers in a graveyard of redwoods, suited up alongside firefighters who are covered in sweat, and dirt itching from yellowjacket stings and poison oak, who risk their lives where I would run away, who don't give up even though so much is destroyed in their efforts to save what little they can. "I am with you."

Who do I say that Jesus is?

The one who will not let us go. No matter what life brings. No matter what death brings. God is with us. Amen.

