

Who Do We Say He Is?
The Rev. Amy Spagna
September 15, 2024 – Pentecost 17B
Mark 8:27-38

"He asked [the disciples], 'But who do you say that I am?'" (Mark 8:29, NRSV)

The question of identity is at the heart of this reading. Who Jesus is, and who we SAY he is, matters enormously. Our answer to that informs how we respond to him. If we, as Peter and the rest seem to want to in this moment, take him as the knight galloping in on his white horse to save us from the things we think are oppressing us, that response becomes a battle cry. Taking up our crosses and following him then becomes an exercise in raw power, used to force others to conform to our version of the gospel. (Note that didn't just happen in history books. It's been a large part of our political conversations over the better part of the last 50 years, and not always for the better.) On the other hand, if we look at his miraculously healing the sick, his teaching, and his display of compassion for everyone he meets through the lens of the cross, as Mark wants us to, then that answer has to include striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of all, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

There's an enormous difference between these two things. The first is about how we co-opt Jesus and his message to satisfy our own needs for certainty and control. The second is about how participating in a life like his requires us to give up some of that comfort and control to help someone else. With his rebuke of Peter, Jesus makes clear that it's the second thing he's really about – and no amount of expectation, projection, or even Peter correcting him is going to stuff him into the box marked "political savior."

If you think this gospel selection is a rerun, you're right. We last heard the "Get behind me, Satan!" admonition back in Lent. The compilers of the lectionary think it's important enough to warrant a repeat performance, so they've included it here, in the middle of the long green growing season after Pentecost. Instead of pairing it with Paul's discussion in Romans about what it means to live in a covenantal relationship with God, they have given us the Letter of James' true statement that the human propensity for running our mouths is a two-edged sword. Peter discovers that truth for himself. The first thing he says, "you are the Messiah," earns him a "good answer, don't share it." The second earns him as close to a verbal smackdown as Jesus ever delivers.

It is here that we get the first strong hint that the title Messiah does not mean what Peter thinks it means. It is that disconnect between Peter's expectations and the reality Jesus articulates which throws Peter for a loop. As I noted back in February, Peter, and many others at that time expected that this Messiah would be a political savior in the classic "strongman" mold. They hoped this strongman would overthrow the Romans and return Israel to the glory days of its past, when King David and his descendants ruled. Jesus' own understanding of the title *Messiah* – in Greek, *Christos*, or anointed one - is completely different. He makes that crystal clear in this moment, when he offers up the first of three predictions about his suffering and death. For Peter and the rest, who still very much seem to cling to their world's ideas about power and strength being the keys to success in it, it's really tough to have that assumption shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. They cannot imagine anything different – and so Peter cannot help but object to what he hears to the effect that Jesus is not planning to

start a revolution.¹ In other words: if Jesus is not the guy who's going to come to overthrow the Romans, then who is he, and what's the point of everything he's doing and saying?

For us, the question of "who do you say that I am?" highlights that there are perhaps nearly as many answers to that question as there are people sitting in these pews. What doesn't help all that much is that the New Testament itself isn't a uniform document where that is concerned. There are four distinct gospel accounts of Jesus' life and work, each with its own unique perspective. That's before you get to Paul and the other letter writers interpreting those teachings for their own communities, and every subsequent generation since which has also had to do its own work of interpreting both the texts themselves, and interpreting the interpreters who came before them.

What has not changed at all is the essential question of Jesus' identity, and what its ramifications are for those who follow him. We decide who we will be when we tell others who he is. We can't answer that question without revealing something about who we are. That, in turn, reveals who we have decided Jesus is. His question to the disciples is not a test, or even an attempt to get a handle on what the pollsters are saying about him. It's the exact moment when we "... come face-to-face with [our] own commitment, [our] own discipleship, [our] own identity. It's the moment when [we] have to admit to what extent how [we] follow Jesus actually connects with some sort of confession of who [we] believe Jesus to be."²

¹ David Lose, "Lent 2B: The Theory of Everything." <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/lent-2-b/> [accessed September 9, 2024].

² Karoline Lewis, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/who-do-you-say-that-i-am> [accessed September 9, 2024].

Peter says, "you are the Messiah." But. Despite everything he's seen Jesus do, and heard Jesus say, Peter cannot quite grasp that not only will his title lead Jesus to suffer and be killed and rise again, it will also require Peter to sacrifice his own life in order to save it. He's already done that, when he walked away from his fishing business to respond to Jesus' invitation to come and follow him – and yet more will be required of him in the days to come. It's a lot to take in, for anyone. And Peter's apparent inability to recognize that is what's at stake in this moment is ultimately what earns him a very sternly worded, "shut up."

As Steve reminded us so well last week, the question of who we are matters. It matters whether or not we're talking about that in an historic sense, or whether our names are among those etched onto these walls, or we're among the faithful cloud of witnesses barely known to history. "Who do YOU say that I am?" is a key question for this community as we begin to move into our third century of existence in this place. Who DO we say that Jesus is? And what does that mean in terms of who we are, both as individuals and collectively as the church known as St. James? How does it color the ways in which we interact with our neighbors?