

Who Do You Say I Am?
Bob Stillerman
13th Sunday After Pentecost, 8/27/2023
Matthew 16:13-20



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The August lectionary passages have been eventful. Week one: In the wilderness, Jesus breaks bread, and feeds the multitudes. Week two: Early one morning, Jesus ghost-walks across the sea, going out to meet the disciples. And Jesus even lets Peter in on the action. Saves him from drowning, too. Week three: In the Region of Sidon and Tyre, Canaanite Country, Jesus meets a woman who challenges and ultimately redefines his calling. And today, week four, in Caesarea Philippi, the administrative capital of the Galilee, Peter offers a profound confession: Jesus is Lord.

Now remember, Matthew's Gospel is rooted in its Jewishness. The Exodus, for this community, is not just something that happened, but continues to happen. It's the central theme of life: God liberates Israel in every generation. And Peter, like any devout disciple, longs for the day when a Messiah, a charismatic and transformative figure, will liberate Israel from its modern Pharaohs, and illumine the divine in new ways for humanity.

What a month of liberation it's been for Peter! Stuck in the wilderness, and beholden to Herod's greedy system of distribution – those hatcheries and vineyards, and all their trimmings are the king's don't you know – Peter can't imagine how to feed the masses. Jesus invites Peter into God's constant source of provisions.

Stuck in the vastness of a tempestuous and topsy-turvy sea, waves-a-rockin', Peter cannot imagine a source larger or more creative than nature. And yet Jesus reminds Peter of the Creator who separates and stills the waters. Jesus offers Peter the assurance of peace in a harried world.

Stuck in the quicksand of systemic racism, classism, and sexism, Peter, nor any practicing member of Jewish faith in First-Century Palestine, nor even Jesus himself, can imagine a God-centeredness that transcends Israel's stubborn boundaries. Geographic. Cultural. Traditional. Political. Social. But a persistent woman is also compelling, and Jesus is reminded that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Peter watches as Jesus is liberated from the unchallenged assumption of being righteous – he's actually bumped right off his pedestal – and, instead, is driven to do what is right and what is just.

A month ago, Peter might have expected Messiah to be someone fashioned like Moses, a warrior, and a political leader, and an all-around galvanizer. Or maybe someone like Elijah – fiery is always good! Or maybe Jeremiah. Who doesn't like a voice that is provocative and prophetic, even if a little weepy? Or maybe even John the Baptist – camel hair and wilderness ventures are good for the soul! Yes, Messiah's gonna be someone recognizable, a warrior, or a priest, or a king, or even a proclaimer.

But here's what happens. Just as Jesus does not come to abolish the idea of Torah, but rather to fulfill it, so too, Jesus comes in a way that fulfills the role of Messiah. God can no longer state Their investment/solidarity in humanity simply by inspiring/provoking generals, princes, judges, or prophets, but rather God intends to experience humanity firsthand. God in the person of Jesus, will know the joys and sorrows of God's people. Because God will live alongside God's people.

"Who do you say I am, "Jesus asks?"

Simon Peter responds, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

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And it's this confession, it's this rock, upon which the Church is built.

I think Jesus' question to Peter is also the primary question for any community of faith. "Who do you say I am?"

What is it that we want to tell the world about our Creator, Sardis? And as Jesus-followers, what is it about the Jesus experience that illumines our sense of the divine?

That's what Church is for. We exist to confess or witness or proclaim what we know of God in the world. Except words like confess, witness, and proclaim have a negative connotation these days – they bring up feelings of coercion, and guilt, and violence, and rigidity. I believe we mean to say celebration instead of confession. I believe we're a people who wish to celebrate, and express, and share the goodness of a loving God that loves the creation They created.

And we aren't all that formal, Sardis, at least in the statements we proclaim on a weekly basis. Sure, we have a few things written down. But you could say we aren't a creedal people. Not to be confused with Creed people, or Creed fans, a grunge band from the 90s. We have about as much desire to be exacting in our expressions of both God and Jesus as we do to listen to mediocre rock ballads – which is to say NOT MUCH!!!

All this makes me wonder. The Jesus story is one of transcendence and expansion. It's not that Judaism ceases to be a relevant, authentic, sacred, and transformative vehicle to divine enlightenment. It always has been and always will be. It's that the Jesus story offers an additional window or path to enlightenment for an entirely new subset of people. Different and distinct. Absolutely. But neither superior nor subordinate

to Judaism nor any other faith. The movement is expansive, and creative, and ever transforming.

Maybe, we as Baptists, or recovering Baptists, or distinct Baptists, or artists-formerly-known-as-Baptists, or just Jesus-followers, are seeking liberation from confession – we want to be invited and encouraged to celebrate a living God, not with exactness, but with expansiveness. We're not so much interested in defining Jesus in perpetuity, as we are illuminating Jesus in the here and now.

I don't expect you to recite the Nicene Creed anytime soon in worship. But as a parting gift to you, I thought I'd share with you some Sardis celebrations – little nuggets of who we say Jesus is. And these nuggets are inspired by the advice of Carlyle Mareny who once warned his congregation, "Be careful, Jesus is always right around the corner."

I've been at Sardis for eight years, and here's what you've told me about the One we follow, and the God Jesus illumines:

- Jesus doesn't put disclaimers on divine love. Jesus tells us that "God loves EVERYONE."
- Jesus shares parables that invite people into beloved community. Redactors of ancient texts often contort these invitations to fit their own agendas. Jesus would encourage us to decipher context – he spent an entire ministry doing the very same thing.
- Jesus doesn't deal in shame and anxiety. Jesus offers acceptance and peace.
- Jesus says it's okay to rest. And to be silly. And sometimes it's even okay to not be okay.
- Jesus is not a justice of the peace; Jesus works for a more just and peaceful world. And beckons us to do the same.

- If you don't have an upper room, a basin of wine, and a six-foot baguette to perform your remembrance of Communion, a potluck will do just fine.
- A January baptismal, full of freezing garden hose water, and warmed, kind of, with two dozen tea kettles, is just as powerful as the Jordan River. Jesus does not baptize in water, but in Spirit.
- Jesus isn't a policy wonk, or a politician, or a publicity hound. Jesus is full of the humanity our world SO desperately needs. And Jesus sees the humanity in every person.
- The love, redemption, and transformation Jesus illumines – God's blanketing presence – isn't limited to humanity. Jesus is restorative for all of creation.

Jesus is Lord! Not in a lording, captive, subversive way. But in a way that matters. Jesus reveals our priorities – life centered in the goodness of God, made known in the goodness of neighbors, and the gifts our collaborative shares and receives with one another. God, humanity, and creation living into their collective potential.

Good friends, after all these years, I realize that I have NOTHING to confess and EVERYTHING to celebrate. Jesus is Lord! And I know a little something of Jesus, actually a lot of something of Jesus, because I have known you.

In the days ahead, I pray that you will resist the urge to confess all those things that you are not, and instead, celebrate all those things that you are. For you are God's people, joined in a celebration of truth: Jesus is Lord! And that is always enough.

In the assurance of your enough-ness, may you always know God's peace, God's love, and God's joy. And may you never, ever, not for one

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second, stop being Sardis. Because your unique expression has, does,
and always will make this world a better place.

Amen.