

Sermon Script  
August 23, 2020

“Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus has been busy since last week. We may remember the Canaanite woman confronting Jesus about being worthy to be fed, even if it is only the scraps from the table. And Jesus eventually commends her for her remarkable faith. If you missed Pastor Courtney’s sermon on this, check it out. Oh, the gifts of having digital worship. You can watch it, or read it again and again.

Ok, back to Jesus.

Jesus commends the Canaanite woman’s faith and then continues on his journey. Large crowds follow him and he heals a bunch of people who are crippled, blind, lame and people unable to talk. This was a big hit, as you can imagine. THEN, Jesus AGAIN, miraculously feeds well over 4,000 people with a couple small loaves of bread and a couple small fish. Not only that, EVERYONE was filled and there were LEFT OVERS. Yup, this too, was a big hit.

THEN, Jesus puts some Pharisees and Sadducees in their place, when they try to test him and ask Jesus for some “signs from heaven.” You can only imagine how this looked to the disciples as they looked on. Along with this, Jesus warns the disciples about the “yeast” of the Sadducees and Pharisees.

Yup, a lot has happened since last week’s Gospel story. But it all is important for today’s story.

NOW, we find Jesus and his disciples in Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi...why did Matthew think it was important for us to know this? I’m guessing it is more than the next location on the journey. Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Mt. Hermon. Remember, Mt. Hermon has a history as a place where God shows up: with Moses in a burning bush and the giving of the commandments and to Elijah in the silence.

Also, Caesarea Philippi was a significant place of pagan worship. It was here that people would offer sacrifices to the god, Pan, the god of “panic”. And in the cliffs around the area, people would build shrines to Pan. This place was thought to be the gate to the underworld or to hell and sacrifices to Pan and other gods, would entice the gods to protect and prosper the people.

THIS is where we are today, with the disciples and with Jesus. And THIS is where Jesus asks this life transformational question, “Who do you say that I am?”

First, Jesus starts with an easier question, “Who do people say that I am?” Well, the group pipes up with a number of answers to this question: “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or some

other prophet.” There, that was easy. It seems to me to answer this question on the behalf of others, is safer for me. But then...

Jesus isn't done. “Who do YOU say that I am?”

With the recent amazing and miraculous activities of Jesus and while standing amongst a history and visual reminders of pagan gods, Jesus asks this question: “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Well, Simon Peter isn't bashful. He jumps right in, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” I can even see Peter, gesturing to all the images of pagan gods and with a exuberant and maybe even a defiant voice to these gods while he proclaims his belief and faith in Jesus.

Finally, Peter seems to get it right. And, Jesus responds with affirmation to Peter's enthusiastic profession. “Your name is now Peter, (which means rock).” AND on this rock, I will build my church and death will have no power over it.”

Now remember where they are standing. They are standing with all kinds of shrines built for other gods, gods that people offered sacrifices to to protect them from the forces of death.

Yes, Peter got it right. But before we jump on the Peter band wagon, you might want to read a little further into the story. More on that later.

For now, though, Peter has proclaimed to Jesus and to the world, who Jesus is to him. And, this confession is enough to build Jesus' church upon, in the midst of all kinds of other forces that threaten the world. It is Peter's response, his confession of who Jesus is, that Jesus is lifting up as worthy to build God's Church.

Again, before we lift Peter up as some sort of hero for his confession, Jesus reminds him and us, that God made Peter's confession possible, not anything else...God makes it possible to build God's Church. God, through Peter's confession, blesses the world with the Church that death can't even destroy...hmmm, haven't we heard something else about death and not having power over God?

So, now you. You and God, you and Jesus. Who do you say Jesus is?

Apparently, our response to this question with God's power, can transform the world. With God, how we respond to this question, matters in the world.

How we answer, “Who do you say, Jesus is?” matters in a time of pandemic.  
How we answer, “Who do you say Jesus is?” matters in times of social and racial unrest.  
How we answer, “Who do you say Jesus is?” matters in times of deep political divisions.  
How we answer, “Who do you say Jesus is?” matters in times of devastating fires and natural disasters.

How we answer, “Who do you say Jesus is?” matters in this place and time.

With images of “Panic” all around us, how will we answer this question? Now, it is tempting to recite what others are saying, like the disciples did with Jesus’ first question. But, today we are asked, “Who do YOU say Jesus is?”

With God’s help, may we, siblings in Christ together, enthusiastically proclaim amongst all the gods of panic, “Jesus, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”