

*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?"* (Mark 8:27-29)

Jesus' haunting question to his disciples – who do you say that I am? – rings true across the ages and confronts us as much now, as it did them then – who do you say I am? The disciples echo the answers they have heard in the crowd – Jesus is John the Baptist, or the returned Elijah. Jesus is one of the prophets. We add our own answers: wise counselor, sage example, God incarnate, distant memory, faithful reflection? At different times and different places, these answers, and many more, have all been offered, and some meet my own experiences with Christ better than others. Love, and hope, and grace, and forgiveness. Each of us gets to name the sacred in our individual walks with God.

But Jesus isn't interested in what the crowds are saying; he wants to know who the disciples say he is. Pressed for a reply, they finally confess: you-are-the-messiah. We, who have the benefit of the full Scripture, know this is indeed the correct proclamation, but to the disciples, still in the midst of Jesus' earthly ministry, it is a scary and dangerous realization. I am probably not telling you anything new when I say that in Jesus' days the people were waiting for God's messiah, the Christ, to come to earth. The timing was perfectly right. Living under pagan, Roman, occupation, the Jewish people were expecting God to send the anointed one, a victorious ruler, a mighty king, to restore the suffering kingdom, and establish God's reign on earth, in Israel. And though nothing in Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching has pointed to the fact that Jesus is to be *this* Messiah, the disciples speak a silent hope that Jesus actually could be the long-awaited one to deliver Israel.

Jesus does not deny that he is indeed the Messiah, but he does teach them that being God's Messiah does not mean what they think it means: God's Messiah is not a powerful ruler, but a suffering servant. As the magnitude and implications of Jesus' identity becomes clear to the disciples, they urge him to make better decisions, to pursue safer goals, and to pick a more affirming fate. Sounds familiar? A God who dies a shameful death, by human hands, remains a mystery to us, too hard to comprehend. Peter stands up to rebuke him, but Jesus will not hear of it, and calls him Satan (Mark 8:32). To be the Son of God means bearing rejection, humiliation, suffering, death, ... before there can be resurrection. The Son of God is to be an embarrassment to the world, and a glorious victory to God alone. Surely, this is not something to be desired, not even by the Son of God, and yet it is an invitation issued to each of us. "Take up your cross and follow me", Jesus says. (Mark 8:34)

As I have preached before at other occasions, I do not wish to romanticize poverty and hardship, to idealize suffering and pain. God does not invite us to be miserable, and God does not sanction abuse, in any shape or form. Those who preach divine purpose in inequality,

injustice, and suffering, have too often been revealed, exposed, as prophets of a different, more worldly agenda. This is not to say that we cannot grow in faith in the midst of adverse circumstances; too many examples of deep faith surround us as faithful witnesses to a loving God, who does not turn away, even when all the world already has. We have no greater hope than the knowledge that no matter what, we are never beyond the reach of God's saving grace. I am simply questioning those who would lead us to meek resignation; those who counsel silence for the victims, and offer excuses for the perpetrators. No, this is not what carrying one's cross is about.

Instead, I believe, Jesus invites us to accept the cost of discipleship, the consequences of what it means to follow in Jesus' footsteps, individually and collectively. This sometimes leads us to make choices and decisions that go against the ways of this world. When our basic instincts tell us to be guarded and protective, God invites us to be welcoming to all. When everything inside tells me to hoard my precious resources, God invites me to be generous. When my heart is set to hold a grudge, God invites me to be forgiving. To carry your cross is not for the weak of heart.

By the standards of this world, Jesus is a failure. A successful ministry of healing and teaching, will come to an inglorious end, deserted by his remaining followers, Jesus is arrested, tortured, tried, and executed. There are no high honors or great achievements in Jesus' future – no book deals or mega-churches. So, it is no surprise that his disciples are shocked by this vision. They have given up their lives to follow Jesus, and now Jesus says: "my life will end in shambles." They need Jesus to be victorious, as much as we need Jesus to be victorious.

But Jesus is not concerned about the standards of this world; Jesus reverses the standards of this world: those who want to save their lives, will lose it; and those who lose their lives, will save it. (Mark 8:35) It is not an invitation to martyrdom, but a rejection of the powers of this world, of the powers that be, of all that seeks to define what it means to be good, happy, and successful in this world. It is a rejection of all that is not God. It is an acknowledgement that not all things in life are sunshine and moon beams, rainbows and butterflies. Sometimes life gets tough, and sometimes we make wrong decisions. I know I have done so at times.

And this is exactly where the Good News is for us today. To stand in Jesus' footsteps and know ourselves loved and accepted by God, even if the world says: "How can this be; he is only a carpenter, the son of Mary, a teacher from Nazareth?" That's who you are, the world says. Of us, the world will say: "How can this be; he is just a drunk, she is a failure, they are homeless? How can this be, she cheated, he lies, they broke the rules and abused the system? How can this be?" And yet, here we are: loved, redeemed, accepted, without conditions or reservations.

This is the good news of God in Jesus Christ. That we are not to be defined as winners and losers by this world, but by a loving God alone. A God who presents himself as a broken human being, suffering as one of us, dying as one of us, asking each of us: "Who do you say that I am?"

Amen.