

“But, who do YOU say that I am?”

Jesus is getting personal with his disciples.

In the gospel of Mark, the disciples never quite get it. They follow, they learn, but they keep showing that they do not understand.

It is outsiders who demonstrate the deepest faith and understanding while the disciples<sup>1</sup>

- Argue with Jesus every time he talks about his suffering, crucifixion and resurrection (today is just the first time)
- They are terrified by two storms at sea
- They can't heal a young boy because they forgot to pray
- They will make HUGE promises of loyalty but abandon Jesus in the end

Last week's Gospel reading surprised us with Jesus' inclusion of Gentiles - female and male - in healing and teaching. Then we skipped over the chapter when Jesus fed the 4,000 gentiles. He is NOT acting like the leader of the Hebrews that his disciples expected.

Peter, like we might, wants Jesus to meet Peter's ideals of a religious/political leader.

- Instead, they move deeper into Gentile territory – the towns in Caesarea Philippi - where Pan is worshipped, the Emperor is worshipped
  - it is as far north as the kingdom of Israel ever reached – shakily, at that.
- For the first time, half-way through this Gospel, Jesus starts to talk about what it means to be his disciple

Does not sound like good news:

- Take up you cross - the excruciating method by which the occupying army eliminated opponents

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<sup>1</sup> [Alyce M. McKenzie |https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=392](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=392)

- Follow me - into the tradition of the prophets which pointed to the role of suffering for the sake of faith
- Jesus refers to himself as “the son of Man” – the Greek is anthropos/ human being – here and every time he tries to teach the disciples about his coming crucifixion and resurrection in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>2</sup>

Did not sound like good news to Peter. Nor to me.

My mother raised me as a Unitarian Universalist and I argued with my minister about why we celebrated Christian holidays - especially Christmas and Easter.

- If Jesus was a prophet and not the Son of God - and we were Unitarians, we did not believe in the Trinity -
  - then we should be celebrating the Jewish holidays
- I did not convince the minister but when I visited with my granny and she took me to churches that said one of the creeds,
  - I would say “I believe in God...pause...creator of heaven and earth.”
  - And stop there, because that is what I could truthfully say.
- When I was 20 I spent time with people who related to God and Jesus in ways I had never encountered before.
  - Personally, involved and active in their lives
  - I began to search and test and see if Jesus was there for me.

C.S. Lewis was an author whose work deeply touched me as I began struggling through the Bible.

- *The Screwtape Letters* described the kinds of evil I had encountered
- The *Narnia* stories got past my sophisticated filters and touched my heart
- And *Mere Christianity* put the kibosh on the tidy pigeon hole where I tried to keep Jesus. Lewis writes: “*You must make your choice: either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us*

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<sup>2</sup> Marius Nel, [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2305-08532017000300004](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2305-08532017000300004)

*not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*

For me, when Jesus asked “But who do YOU say that I am?” I finally had to admit he was my troublesome, stubborn savior

- and I was baptized.

In this passage, from the middle of Mark, we see Jesus breaking out of the pigeon holes where the disciples tried to put their teacher.

- Peter says “you are the Messiah...the Christ” - using the term “Christ,” the anointed one, for the first time since the opening verse of this Gospel
- Peter probably assumed that Jesus was going to overthrow the occupying Roman army & restore a purified Kingdom of Israel<sup>3</sup>
- Peter certainly did not want Jesus evoking those suffering servant images of the prophets
  - Like the ones who, six centuries earlier, accompanied the people of Jerusalem into Babylonian exile as we heard in Isaiah this morning.

Are we willing to listen when Jesus tells Peter: you’ve missed it entirely!

- As I said, in this Gospel, the disciples are especially prone to missing it

Instead, might we be able to learn from the “outsiders” in this Gospel who seek out Jesus and allow the Holy One to turn their lives around?<sup>4</sup>

- The paralytic’s friends who dug through the roof to get their friend the healing he needed
- The terrified and terrifying occupant of the Gerasene graveyard whose transformation scared his neighbors even more than his actions when he was wounded
- The unnamed woman with the ointment who saw where this story was going and prepared Jesus for his burial by anointing him at a dinner party

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<sup>3</sup> [Matt Skinner | https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1383](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1383)

<sup>4</sup> McKenzie, *ibid*

- The women who risked violence from the soldiers by staying with Jesus as he was nailed to a cross to die
- Joseph of Arimathea, who surely annoyed Pilate – who had been having a really bad day - by asking for Jesus' body
  - and thus aligning himself with a criminal executed by the ruling government

Each of these people can challenge us to look out our life of faith in new ways.

To sit with Jesus' troublesome question: Who do YOU say that I am?

- How has our relationship with the Holy One grown or changed as our lives have changed?
- How do we support each other in seeking health - like the friends of the man who could not get himself to the teacher for healing?
- How truthful can we be about our brokenness and profound need of healing - or will we stay in hiding in our own graveyards?
- How willing are we to go into the valleys?
  - Valleys of the shadow of death or of other people's suffering?
- How much will we risk to see justice and mercy served?

These are some of the ways that we might struggle to understand and live into what it means for us to “take up our cross and follow Jesus.”

- Today's gospel passage makes it clear following Jesus means that changes are ahead - and they won't be easy.
- But we are not alone on this road.
  - Jesus goes before us and with us
  - We have companions in this community, maybe in our families
  - We have teachers from the history of our faith community
  - We can delve into some of these resources in the next few months as we *Explore the Way of Love* offered by Presiding Bishop Curry.

We have the opportunity

- to deepen our understanding,
- to change our relationship with the Holy One,
- most importantly: to bask in the profound, unquenchable love of the One who asks us:

But who do YOU say that I am?

Amen.

**Lessons:**

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

[Psalm 116:1-8](#)

[James 3:1-12](#)

[Mark 8:27-38](#)

*O God, because without you we are not able to please you mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*