

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8:27-38
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" he is not asking them a test question. He is asking them a *life* question. It is not the kind of question where you worry whether you gave the correct answer or not, which means that its intended effect is not to make us nervous about whether we passed an exam. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" he is actually asking, "How are you going to live your life?" This is not a question that we answer only with our mouths. It is a question that we answer primarily with our lives.

When Peter answers that *Jesus* is the Messiah, he is claiming that Jesus is the agent through whom God's kingdom draws near. A Messiah reveals the pattern of God's intended purposes. It matters who we claim as Messiah and Lord. A Messiah's followers take their cues about how to live from their Messiah. If a Messiah is a forceful military conqueror, then you better believe that that Messiah's followers are going to prize domination and military force above all else. Military power would be the answer to the world's biggest problems. If a Messiah were an intellectual genius who solves people's problems with brilliant thinking, then that Messiah's followers are going to view the mind as the primary tool for fixing things. If a Messiah were someone who uses wealth and riches to overcome trouble, then that Messiah's followers would see the accumulation of wealth as the path to security.

So you can understand why Peter reacts so negatively to Jesus' immediate announcement that he was going to undergo great suffering, rejection, and death – much like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 50 in the first text that Pam read. When we have been fundamentally shaped by a world of power, intelligence, and wealth, suffering and rejection and loss are going to seem like ways to fail, rather than ways to redeem the world.

But Jesus is a different kind of Messiah, who brings about a different kind of kingdom. Jesus brings about the kingdom of mercy and grace, not the kingdoms of judgment and exclusion. And the kingdom of mercy and grace and radical inclusion will not be brought about by violence or judgmentalism or tactics of fear. It will be brought about by patience, and compassion towards the outsider, and steadfast love in the face of evil.

That's who our Messiah is. That is the kingdom that we are called to live in and to bear witness to. In our society of fear and hostility and coercive manipulation, a society that is crushing the spirits of so many, that is putting all kinds of pressure on young

people, that too often tells older people that they no longer have value, that regularly suggests to people that the color of their skin determines their place in society, that leads people to believe that the earth is simply ours to do whatever we want with, in that society, the church of Jesus Christ is called to the uncommon path of loving your neighbor, loving your enemy, welcoming the stranger, living simply, sharing generously, confessing your wrongs and forgiving the wrongs done to you, and walking gently upon the earth.

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, we are beginning a new program year – a new year of adult education, a new year of mission, a new year of youth ministry, a new year of caring for each other, a new year of building friendships with our neighbors at Lewinsville Retirement Residence and Evans Farm and McLean Commons and Tysons and the Fallstead, a new year of developing the faith of children and families in Messy Church, of singing and ringing – outdoors for now, as we are beginning this program year that is the 175th anniversary year of this congregation, this year that will see the completion of the building renovation, this year in which we will be installing our new Associate Pastor for Christian Formation, as we are beginning this new year, what kind of Messiah are we going to follow? Who do we say that Jesus is?

We are all deeply aware of the challenges that lie in front of us. Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, a day that continues to reverberate with loss and anger and sadness. The Second Saturday Set has been sharing with each other their painful and poignant memories of that day, as have so many of us. The events of that day continue to shape and impact our world today – in policy, in how we think about our country, how we think about the rest of the world. Part of the common work before us is for all of us to continue to discern how to live responsibly in a globally connected world, where there are competing interests and values. This is work for which the church has vital wisdom to contribute to the larger conversation.

Following Jesus as Messiah does not mean that we will be insulated or protected from pain and suffering or trouble. In fact, if Jesus is to be taken seriously in our passage, as we follow Jesus, we may expect to encounter trouble and rejection and loss, rather than to be shielded from it.

But friends, the good news of the gospel is that *joy* does not depend on avoiding trouble or loss. Joy does not depend on external circumstances going the way we want them to. Now the world does not believe this. The world believes that the path to joy is through accumulating success and power and wealth and making things go your way. But the church knows that the path to the deepest, truest, longest-lasting joy goes through the cross. The path of joy enfolds all of our losses, includes all of our failures, embraces all of our weaknesses, and forgives all of our sins. That is why we do not need to be afraid, of anything, or anyone, anymore.

My goodness. Can you hear the good news in that? The path of joy is the path of Jesus Christ, and we get to walk that together.

As we are beginning a new year, friends, I want to invite you to set out 1 or 2 goals for your life of faith this year. In your own life of faith, what are 1-2 things that you would like to see grow over the next year? There are pencils and sheets of paper in the pews for you to write on. Is there a particular quality of life that you would like to cultivate this year – patience, gentleness, self-control, joy, love, peace, generosity, kindness? Is there a particular effort in the world that you would like to participate in, as an expression of your discipleship? This would especially be about a change that you would like to see in your own life, not so much about achieving or accomplishing something in the world – because there are so many more variables involved in that and we cannot always control them – but about making a change in your own life. Is there a part of the Bible you'd like to get to know? Is there a relationship you'd like to work on? Over the course of the rest of the service, I'd invite you to identify 1-2 goals for the next year, then you can take that home and identify specific steps that you can take that will move you in the direction of that goal.

May this next year be a year of deepening of our friendships with Jesus, extension of our mission and ministry, and growth in our faith. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.