

2020 08 23 – Who Do You Say that I Am? – Part Two

Matthew 16:13-20

Last week I introduced you to our four-week sermon series entitled “Who Do you Say that I Am?” This series is an opportunity to explore who Jesus was to his disciples 2000 years ago and who he is for us in the 21st century. We are looking at four different scripture passages from the gospel of Matthew to see what they tell us about Jesus’ identity and what it means to be his followers in today’s world.

I guess it’s now obvious where I got the inspiration for the series’ title. These are Jesus’ own words spoken to his disciples. In today’s scripture reading Jesus is near the town of Caesarea Philippi. It is one of those rare moments where Jesus is alone with his disciples and he takes this opportunity to ask them a question. He says, “What do people say about who the Chosen One is?” When Jesus uses the term “the Chosen One,” he is, of course, talking about himself. Other translations use the phrase “Son of Man.” Either way, the term refers both to Jesus’ humanity and to his deep connection to God.

The disciples respond to Jesus’ question with several answers, “Some say John the Baptizer, others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” The people of Galilee and Judah are comparing Jesus to their prophets of old, to men who are dead—some recently, like John the Baptist, others who died centuries before. These prophets were seen as holy, as men with a deep connection to the Spirit. They were people who literally spoke for God.

But Jesus is looking for something more and so he asks, “And you, who do you say that I am?” It’s interesting to note that this time most of the disciples remain silent. This is obviously not a simple question for them to answer.

If you remember, last week I asked you a similar question. I asked you to share some words that you would use to describe Jesus, both his role and his character. You actually came up with quite a long list! We then went on to talk about Jesus the teacher (or rabbi), about his humanity and that, like us, Jesus was a life-long learner. The fact that this is a four-part series is a clue to the many and varied facets of Jesus’ identity.

But I think the disciples realize that, in this moment, Jesus is looking for a specific answer. And Simon Peter is the only one willing to stick his neck out and offer a response. He says, “You are the Messiah, the Firstborn of the Living God.” So Peter calls Jesus, “the Messiah.” Let’s take a moment to unpack that word.

For Jesus and his disciples, for Jewish people then and now, the Messiah is someone who has been foretold by the prophets of old, someone who is: “wise, righteous, just, and politically adept,” someone who will save them from their oppressors, someone who will rule so well that God’s reign of peace and justice will become a reality on this earth.

<https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/news/waiting-messiah>

The Hebrew word “Messiah” means “the anointed one.” It was the Jewish custom to declare a person’s special status before God and the people by

anointing their head with oil. In the Hebrew Scriptures we find many examples of kings, priests and even prophets who were anointed.

Calling Jesus the “Messiah” means that he is the one the Jewish people are waiting for, the one who will bring the Israelites to freedom, the one who will save them from their oppressors, the one who will redeem the world. It’s interesting to note that we, as Christians refer to Jesus as the Messiah, and even more frequently as the Christ, a Greek word with the same meaning. Meanwhile our Jewish neighbours are still waiting for the Messiah to arrive.

Of course Jesus was a different kind of messiah than many would have expected. He was not a king like his ancestor David, he didn’t have an army. He had no interest in using violence in any form. But we do know that Jesus was clear about his messianic mission. In Luke 4:18 Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and proclaims:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and
recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

Yes, Jesus’ ministry was all about building God’s reign on earth, but Jesus was doing it with love. He based his actions on the Jewish commandments: 1) Love God and 2) love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).

I wonder, if Christ were to come again today, if the Jewish messiah was to arrive in the year 2020, what would he or she be like? How would we recognize this

modern-day Messiah? This past week most of us probably watched some part of the Democratic National Convention in the U.S and this weekend the Conservative party in Canada is choosing their new leader. We also have both provincial and municipal elections coming up in Saskatchewan this fall. You see, these days we don't have kings. We live in a democracy, where our political leaders are chosen by vote, not by anointing with oil. But, despite long selection processes, we rarely have reason to believe that our prime ministers, presidents, premiers, governors or even mayors were chosen by God. So if our political leaders are unlikely candidates, where do we go to search for the Messiah?

Let's go back to today's scripture reading. When Simon Peter says, "You are the Messiah," Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon ben- Jonah! No mere mortal has revealed this to you, but my Abba God in heaven. Jesus was thrilled because Simon Peter's answer indicated that this disciples' relationship with God was growing stronger.

You see how we identify Jesus and who we see as the Christ or the Messiah depends on our own personal connection with God. In order for us to recognize the sacred in someone else, we first need to recognize and know the sacred within ourselves. We need to give ourselves the time and the space to listen to that still small voice within us. We need to listen and to hear what that voice is telling us to be and to do.

I believe that we all have a role to play in building God's reign on earth and that it is possible to see the face of Christ, the Messiah in each and every one of us.

Even if we believe that a Messiah is coming (or coming again) to redeem the earth, we still have a role to play, a job to do, it is still up to us to build God's world of peace and justice. In fact, when Jesus said, "on bedrock like this I will build my community," I believe he was talking about the bedrock of his messianic ministry of peace and justice. Rabbi Jacob Staub explains that,

Even though [Jews] say we are waiting, we are not waiting passively to be rescued. We are actively working to hasten the arrival of the messianic era by increasing justice and peace, by fighting oppression and human suffering. Our awareness of the unredeemed state of the world moves us to work to make things better. <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/news/waiting-messiah>

Even with their different doctrines, our Jewish neighbours are working towards the same goal. Of course, how can this be a surprise, since Jesus himself, was a descendant of David, an Israelite, a Jew.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ and that he came to share the good news of God's reign of peace and justice. As Christians we believe that the messianic era has already begun. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we, like our Jewish neighbours, are called to work for a better world, a world where peace and justice will reign supreme.