

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
March 13, 2011, First Sunday in Lent
“Who Do You Say I Am?”
Matthew 16:13-20**

Too many things have converged this week for me to do justice to them all in one sermon. It is the beginning of Lent, so we are preparing ourselves to remember Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospel passage describes Jesus' famous question to Peter, “Who do you say that I am?,” which prompts us to ask ourselves what we mean when we say the name “Jesus Christ.” And the earthquake in Japan, coming on the heels of the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, compels us to ask what it means to profess faith in God when natural disasters kill so many of God's children. I can't answer all these questions in one sermon. I can only hope to guide you to the right place to stand as you consider these questions for yourself.

People say to me, including some of you, “I like Jesus, but I am not so sure about the Christ part. I like his teachings and his love; I'm not so sure about the Son of God part.” Jesus had the same conversation with his disciples: “Who do people say I am?” “Well,” came the reply, “people out there say you are a great teacher, a prophet and man of God like John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah.” “But who do you say I am?” was Jesus' follow-up question that put them on the spot; to which Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” So how do we get from standing out there, unsure about the Son of God stuff, to standing in the inner circle with Peter and the disciples?

There is no single path you can travel to make that journey of faith. There is no simple formula I can teach you that will move you from describing Jesus of Nazareth to professing Christ as the Son of God. But to ask the question itself is the first step in the right direction. “Who was Jesus? What do you and I really know about him?” Quite a lot, actually. Most of the writings in the New Testament about Jesus are original documents (like Paul's letters) or gospels based on early documents composed very near to the time of Jesus himself. And first-century Palestine was a culture with a strong oral tradition where people were skilled at preserving and handing on accounts of important events.¹ So the written evidence we possess about the character, words and deeds of Jesus deserves to be taken seriously.

Second, as the Christian scientist John Polkinghorne points out, there is a crucial difference between Jesus and other founders of world religions like Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed. All were wise, did remarkable things, and had charismatic power to draw in lots of followers. But Jesus died in mid-life, unlike the others who ended their lives in honored old age, surrounded by disciples who would carry on their Master's work. Jesus was deserted at death, suffering a painful crucifixion that any would interpret as a sign of God's rejection. Yet we have all heard of Jesus. Something happened to continue his story.² The short answer is that Jesus was raised from the dead – resurrected to a new life of Lordship and glory. But even if you're not ready to go

that far, it must be admitted that something happened to turn Jesus' tragic, historical story into an affirming, world-encompassing religion of living faith.

Despite all that, some people say they don't understand how Jesus, the man from Nazareth, can also be the Christ, the incarnation of God. Then they go the next step and say, "Because I don't understand this, I cannot believe it either." Famous people of faith, like Augustine and Anselm, have said that we have to reverse the order in this equation: We believe in order to understand (Credo ut intelligam). I believe that there was a historical figure named Jesus, as described in the bible. I believe that something happened so that this isolated teacher in Palestine became the source of a living faith for thousands, millions, billions of people. I believe that his existence on earth contained flesh and blood and mystery, things I can measure and things that are miraculous and beyond my comprehension. The first step is simply to ask the question "Who was Jesus?" The second step is to accept that something about this Jesus points to his being the Christ, and by believing even that much, (credo ut intelligam) we move closer to understanding a part of what it means to be a Christian.³

But what about the things that make it hard to believe in Jesus Christ, such as the flawed, imperfect institution called the church? People tell me some version of this all the time: I like God and faith, but I can't stand the church because of big things like bad ministers, racism, sex abuse scandals or being on the wrong side of justice issues, and because of little things like bad sermons, bad music, or bad coffee at the fellowship hour. Frankly, a lot of this problem stems from the fact that the word "church" can have two meanings. Remember our gospel passage: Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ," and Jesus praised him by saying "Flesh and blood, reason and rationality, has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Then he goes on to say, "You, Peter, are a rock upon which I will build my church." We commonly take those words to mean literal rocks and mortar, church buildings and institutions built upon the foundation of the first disciples. But the word Jesus used was "ekklesia," which doesn't mean a church building, but rather a church community. Upon this rock of faith I will build my community of believers, and not even the gates of Hell, the powers of darkness and death and brokenness wherever they might be in this world, can prevail against this "ekklesia." So here are the steps to take: First, ask the question "Who is Jesus?" Next, accept that something in Jesus also points to his being the Christ. Then commit to a church ekklesia, even with its imperfections and flaws, and you'll find yourself moving closer to the very kingdom of heaven.

Next question: In light of the recent newspaper headlines, does this faith talk have any real bearing on the suffering and pain present in our world? An 8.9 magnitude earthquake hits Japan, triggering tsunamis and fires with over 1,000 dead so far. Did God cause this earthquake? Did God cause the one in 1755 in Lisbon, Portugal that struck on All Saint's Day at 9:30 in the morning when all the churches were full as they collapsed on that grim day? The age-old question is "Why is there evil in the world?", but that's not a question easily answered. There simply is evil and violence, both manmade and nature-made, in this world. The real question is "Where is God when there are earthquakes and tragedies and violence here on earth?" And to that question

comes an answer: “God in Christ is right there in the midst of it all, as we are, doing what is just, redeeming and healing so that it might be on earth as it is in heaven until heaven and earth are one.”

An apocryphal story is told of Mother Teresa, who was asked by a visitor “Is God just?” doing so as Mother Teresa was busy washing a weak and emaciated woman who had been brought to her leprosy hospital. “Exactly what do you mean by just?” came the reply, followed by, “Here, hold her up while I get a clean sari.” Suddenly the visitor is holding a living example of injustice. And she must help and hold and comfort and be patient. Railing against injustice isn’t what the woman needs; she needs a clean sari and a clean bed. That task finished, Mother Teresa quickly moves to the next bed. The visitor says, “Wait – doing the right thing; that what I mean by just.” Mother Teresa handed her a sheet, expecting her to tuck it under the plastic-covered mattress. Then she paused, looking over the half-lifted mattress and said, “And how will you know what it means to do the right thing, unless you do it?”⁴

Long ago a rabbi named Jesus came into the region near the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi. In his world there were people on gold thrones and people on dirt floors, then as now. In his world there were storms that tossed the Galilean Sea and tsunami waves that crushed villages on seashores, then as now. In his world, as in ours, was light and darkness, hope and despair. Jesus asked, “Who do people say that I am?” And he heard a variety of answers – some institutional, some cultural, some wishful thinking, some fixated on the end of the world. But then he looked his followers in the eye, then as now, and asked “Who do you say I am?” His question was the first step to a new place altogether.

As a disciple, you take a first step by considering the things you know about Jesus. You soon sense that there is something more here – something timeless, foundational, and good. There’s something that points you to heaven, toward a spiritual power that breaks into our fleshly reality to shatter the old way of doing things. Peter nearby shouts out, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” As you hear those words you begin to believe them even if you don’t fully understand them; and that is the second step of faith. But to say them for yourself seems odd and eccentric – I believe in Jesus Christ – until you realize that you are not alone in speaking the answer. You are with others, in an ekklesia, a community and church. And you are comforted by Jesus’ promise, “Not even death itself can prevail against this.” Moving into the community is the third step.

But what of the earthquakes and violence around us? What of the violence that prompted a mob to call for Jesus to be crucified? What of the countless deaths since that dark day on Golgotha – the tsunamis, the cancers, the wars and disease and starvation? In a real way, Mother Teresa’s comment remains part of the answer: How will you know what it means to do the right thing until you do it? Doing what is right is the fourth step. As I said earlier, I can’t answer all these questions in one sermon. I can only hope to guide you step by step to the right place to stand as you consider them for yourself. The place is here, beneath a Lenten cross. It is here, beneath an empty cross,

for the crucified one is also the resurrected Lord. It is here, together with others who seek, “credo ut intelligam”, to believe and understand. It is here reaching out a hand to do what is right so by grace we come to know what is right. Jesus the Christ asks “Who do you say I am?” Answer him.

AMEN

¹ John Polkinghorne & Nicholas Beale, Questions of Truth, 2009, p. 20.

² Ibid, p. 21.

³ This also relates to Tertullian’s famous quote, “I believe because it is absurd,” meaning that Christianity is believable because people hold so firmly to it even though a host of other, perhaps more plausible answers about who Jesus was are available to them.

⁴ Website: Wesley Heritage Foundation, article by Anne M. Brackett, “Theodicy: Where Would a Just God Be If Not In the Earthquake”, July 15, 2001.