

Matthew 16:13-20

Who Do *You* Say That I Am?

Earlier this week I was checking out what might be available through the “on demand” feature of my cable package and I stumbled across a series on the History Channel called “Ancient Aliens.” Apparently there are several episodes in this series, but I could not resist calling up the one titled “Sacred Places.”

What followed, to both my amusement and astonishment, was a parade of “experts” detailing how everything from Moses encounter with God on the Holy mountain, Ezekiel being born off in a chariot flying through the sky, to Jacob’s ladder going up into heaven with angel’s ascending and descending provided “unequivocal” proof that aliens had to come to us in ancient times and these early civilizations mistook them for God. They even threw in some Mohammed and some Eastern Indian gods to seal the deal.

Well, after this I could not resist peeking in on another episode and in that one still more experts outlined the case that humans evolved because 1) either these ancient aliens seeded our DNA to make us unique among earth’s inhabitants or 2) Future humans traveled back in time to meet their primitive selves through a worm hole and gave us a leg up when we were sputtering through our more primitive incarnation. And these early cave men and women once again mistook their visitors from the future as God.

Now, I start with this somewhat embarrassing peek into how sometimes spend my evenings because the more I watched parts of this series I was astounded that there were obviously enough people out there who believed this stuff that the History Channel would make it into a semi-regular series.

And as I considered this morning’s gospel, I wondered how it is that people can think that Christians are deluded and even stupid or crazy for professing our belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, but might consider ancient alien visitation a more plausible explanation!

So here we stand with Peter and the rest of Jesus’ disciples on this road in Caesarea Philippi and we too have some thinking and deciding to do.

In this dramatic scene we see a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Peter’s confession, though powerful, simply announces with certainty that we have arrived at a point to which Jesus has been leading us all along.

Through Matthew’s masterful proclamation we have already heard way back at the beginning in chapter 1 that Jesus is the Messiah (1:18). And in chapter 4 we heard that Simon’s’ nickname would be Peter (4:18) and in chapter 14 (33) after Jesus walked on water and calmed the stormy sea, the disciples proclaimed him as the Son of God.

As Biblical scholar Tom Long says, “Streams that have sprung forth earlier in Matthew now flow together into a deep and refreshing pool, from which the rest of the Gospel will draw.”<sup>1</sup>

So if Matthew has already let the cat out of the bag, why is this scene so pivotal?

It is pivotal and powerful because this is a crossroads moment, not just for Jesus, but for his disciples as well.

This is where those who follow Jesus move from simply being observers who are hearing and thinking about this man Jesus, to taking that dramatic step, like Peter, to decide if this Jesus and his mission is something we can believe in.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Matthew” in the Westminster Bible Companion, 183.

With his question Jesus is not simply taking a poll to assess the popular opinion, he is in fact looking to see if his followers have learned to see him through the eyes of faith.

The disciples various answers of public opinion versus Peter's heartfelt profession show a sharp contrast. To the world Jesus is simply cut from the cloth of another prophet of old.

And to be fair—Jesus' ministry does share similarities to John, Elijah and Jeremiah as well as many of the prophets, but the similarities are in the end only surface, the character of Jesus' ministry has been quite different, but even those closest to Jesus seem not to have fully grasped the difference.

To quote Tom Long again, "The people have turned Jesus, who is a window to the kingdom of God--- into a mirror. They look at Jesus, and they don't really see this new thing that God is doing---they see only religious ideas from their past."<sup>2</sup>

And as I said in our newsletter this week, we must admit that we are all tempted at some point or another to shape Jesus into our own image; both as individuals and as religious denominations we are tempted to squeeze Jesus into a mold we think he should fit. And over human history the Church has formed Jesus into the shape of a bloody Crusader, A cruel Inquisitor, and a burner of witches. In the last 30 years or so we have molded Jesus into a kinder, gentler form—he has been described as everything from a great teacher of wisdom, a social reformer, a champion of individual freedom, a nature lover, a mystic, and a revolutionary.<sup>3</sup>

Other modern forms of Jesus are a great piggy bank in the sky: "Take Jesus as your personal Savior and you will know happiness, prosperity and wealth."

If you listen still closer to who the people are saying Jesus is you might hear that Jesus is the one who wants to return prayer to public schools, wants to erect stone monuments with the Ten Commandments in southern courthouses, and to yet others he is the one who demands that Christians kill pro choice Doctors.

And in still other places, perhaps most frightening, you hear nothing at all. Jesus who? He has for many become simply irrelevant---of no consequence, just another silly superstition. And who can blame them? If we in the Church don't really understand who he is why should anyone else even bother?

In all of these cases we have made Jesus just another ideologue or worse—we have made him into a brand name and used him to market our own religious preconceptions.

And in truth Jesus is *many* things, our task is to peel away what it is we *think* we know about Jesus and see him with new eyes and a new heart---a heart open enough to be filled with a deeper Truth---a truth that goes beyond our own limited understanding and desires.

So Jesus stands before all of us again this morning with this very difficult question, "People of St Stephen's, my followers, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

It is important to remember that Jesus wasn't addressing his question to Peter alone, but to all of his disciples---Peter, as usual, was simply the first to speak up! And today was his gold star moment! We will see him fall flat on his face again in just a few more lines of the story, but still he is on his way to understanding something new and profound.

I think this is a question every community of faith must answer and I think it is a question we most often leave both unasked and unanswered. We don't mean to, we just seem to think the answer is somehow self-evident.

But the history of the Church would prove that it is not. The good news for us, should we decide to think on this seriously, is that there is deep grace and hope to be mined in what Jesus says to Peter after he has answered the question. "Blessed are you," Jesus says to him, "you did not get this insight from human beings, but as a revelation from my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.

To his promise to build the church on the foundation of Peter, Jesus added two final proclamations—he told Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church and that the church was entrusted with the keys to God's reign.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Matthew" in *The Westminster Bible Companion*, 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

This does not mean of course that the church is never wrong or that God promises to uphold everything the church does no matter what. What it does mean is that no matter many times we get it wrong (just like Peter) God will not abandon us and that God will keep guiding us until we get it right.<sup>4</sup>

We are not you see, the result of human achievement, (or with all due respect to The History Channel, even the result of ancient alien visitors!) We are simply the beneficiaries of a blessing too profound to measure; blessing that calls us into a being as a people of mercy, compassion and justice.

So once again, the question that has echoed through time still reverberates around all of us gathered here this morning: People of St. Stephen's---- who do *you* say that I am? What do we, as a piece of the rock in this little corner of God's creation, want to loose and bind in the name of Christ? With Christ, the possibilities are endless...Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.