

## Pentecost 13, 2023

So far in Matthew, Jesus has been called a few names. In the very first chapter, the Angel that spoke to Joseph in a dream told Joseph that Mary's child would be named Jesus - Emmanuel: "God with us." The wise men from the East call him 'king.' Tempted in the wilderness for forty days after his baptism, Jesus is called by the devil 'Son of God'. He was called 'teacher' by many, 'Lord' by a leper, 'Son of David' by two blind men. John the Baptist suspected he was the Messiah - the anointed one from God, the one for whom we have been waiting - but he wasn't sure. And John's captor, the one who eventually killed him, thought Jesus might be John himself, back from the dead.

Though some of these names were truer than others, there was no real consensus about who Jesus was. So when he asks the disciples "Who do the people say that I am?" it makes sense that their answers are many: Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

This confusion was likely by design. Jesus knew that his true identity would be a problem for people in authority - people who had the power to kill him. He had good news to proclaim in word and deed, and he needed time to do it. So 'coming out' immediately wouldn't have been wise. Instead, he sort of let people decide for themselves who he was. At least at first.

Here though, speaking with the disciples, he wants to assess the lay of the land - who do people say that I am? Then he turns his concern toward them, the disciples - who do you say that I am?

What answer would you have given? How would you answer that question now? Chances are good that your answer today is different than it might have been when you were younger, just starting to learn about Jesus. Think with me about Peter. He was just starting to learn about Jesus. Following after him, Peter was only starting to get a picture of who he was. The life-long journey that Peter would have because of this Jesus was only beginning. And yet he answered Jesus' question with a boldness and clarity that is surprising for where he was on that journey.

Here's where I'm going with this: It's one thing to say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." It's another thing to believe it, to know it, to understand what it means. It's clear that Peter isn't there yet because only three verses later, we find him scolding Jesus for predicting his coming death and resurrection. This is what Peter's answer means, but he didn't yet get it.

This is Peter - who is considered widely the first "Pope" of the early church. This is Peter, the one shouting at the crowd in Acts in the wake of the Spirit's descending with mighty wind and tongues of fire. The one who received visions on the roof in Jopah that sent him to gentiles, opening his work and calling to the non-Jewish world as apostle to the gentiles. And this is Peter who, at the very gates where Jesus was being tried before his death, denied him three times.

Peter really reveals the journey we all undergo as Christians. Whenever we first hear about Jesus, we learn what people tell us. Maybe we believe it, but Jesus Christ the Messiah is more than a name and it takes a lifetime to learn what that 'more' is - what it means and why it matters to us, to you. In this way, the Christian life (the life of following Christ) is a path that results in a certain 'becoming.' It's a similar kind of becoming that we send these young students to. They even remind us of this kind of becoming, the kind that Peter is just beginning.

I think Paul understood this calling of Christian becoming. But his word for it in our reading from Romans is 'transformation'. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect." Do you hear the way he 'leans' toward that something, that becoming?

Transformation is ultimately the true name, the true aim of this Christian life. It's a transformation that begins in our baptism. Luther describes baptism in transformational language - the drowning death of the old Adam in us and being raised to new life, living before God. But Luther talks about that single moment of transformation as a lived process as well: In a fuller way, he says, [baptism] signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

So even baptism is a daily process of transformation. Rising again: a daily practice of remembering the water and word from which we were raised and the life giving God that did the raising.

And if the congregation that bore witness to that moment lives up to the promises it makes, that person will grow to the point where they can repeat who this Jesus is. That's where we meet Peter today.

We are in the last days of summer, so I'm trying to soak up as much warmth as I can for the long dark that will be here all too soon. This means that I take a walk in the middle of the day - just that way. Well, on my walk back, I came across these plants. Some of you might remember me and Phoebe sitting up here talking about these plants a few months ago for a children's sermon. But those plants looked different, didn't they? They were greener. They were taller too but truly they are finished with their roots now.

See the transformation they've undergone. They're a little dryer, browner. In the short life they've lived before they go dormant for the winter, they have matured. Eventually, matured as they are, these plants, along with their friends, will release these seeds that will soon enough sprout and grow. Do we have a better hope than that for the span of our short lives?

Undergoing that process of maturation, of transformation is not a path everyone takes. It's a harder road than the one we are met with in Sunday school or whenever it is we learn to speak Jesus' name. It's a path whose end is uncertain - following Jesus will inevitably lead us to the cross, just as it did Peter. But the Psalmist writes true: "The Lord will fulfill God's purpose for me."

The Lord will fulfill God's purpose for you, dear ones. God calls you further down the road than you might rather go. But go with you in Christ God does, maturing the seeds of faith that begin with a name.

AMEN