

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 16A – August 23, 2020
Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN
 Have you ever been introduced to a friend’s family and have them ask, first thing, “Who are your people?” That’s kind of what Jesus is getting at here. He’s asking the disciples to tell him what the prevailing opinion is about who he is – among the people generally, and then among his closest followers. As we noted last week, in the First Century Mediterranean world people didn’t experience the individuality of personality that we do. Who you were was determined by the family into which you were born.

And Peter gets it right: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). But this observation is unusual, because it doesn’t refer to Jesus’ earthly family. As the first disciple called, Peter has participated in every learning session offered by Jesus from the beginning of the public ministry. Peter’s confession suggests that he has been paying attention—for the moment, at least.

Peter has observed the healings of mercy, he has heard the sermons on justice, and twice he has tasted bread multiplied and shared with thousands. He has been saved by the grasp of the Lord’s own hand when stormy waters threatened to sink him; he has professed with others, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:28-33). Sight, sound, taste, touch ... through the flesh and blood of his own experience, Peter has learned much about Jesus. He is an excellent student.

The most important element of this episode, however, is not Peter’s capacity as a gifted student; rather, it is the truth to which Peter’s answer points. Peter and his colleagues are in the presence of the One who is *anointed by* and *Son of* the living God.

Jesus is not just one prophet among a long line of prophets, as “the people” suggest by their almost multiple-choice answers (Matthew 16:13-14). Peter’s answer points in the direction of a greater truth: as Son of the living God, this Messiah, this chosen one, is also the one who is “God with us,” Emmanuel. (Matthew 1:23).

That truth is significant because it means that everything the disciples have experienced with Jesus, everything they have learned from this Messiah through

their limited senses of sight, sound, taste, and touch, is not simply knowledge or experience revealed through “flesh and blood.” It is, in fact, a revelation from God.

Their human senses and experience are imperfect, but God’s revelation is not limited by that imperfection. Jesus’ own “Father in heaven” has revealed the truth through the words and deeds of Jesus. “[F]lesh and blood has not revealed this to you,” says Jesus to Peter, “but my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17).

To the extent that the church is built on “this rock” (whether the rock refers to Peter himself, or to the words of his confession), it is worth naming the means through which we experience the revelatory power of God.

Peter’s confession in Matthew echoes that presented in the Gospel of Mark. They locate the event in or around Caesarea Philippi, a city outside of the familiar region of Galilee in which most of Jesus’ ministry has taken place. They include the same questions and Peter announces that Jesus is Messiah in both. Only in Matthew’s telling does Peter state that Jesus is, “Son of the Living God” (v.16).

It is significant that this event occurred in Caesarea Philippi, a city located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was near a trade route that connected Tyre in the West to Damascus in the Northeast. A nearby cave housed a great spring that fed one of the sources of the Jordan River. (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, (B.J. 1.21.3).) The cave and spring were a place of worship to the Greek fertility god, Pan.

There were also signs of power and authority at Caesarea Philippi. Before Jesus’ birth, Herod the Great had built a temple near the spring in honor of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor. You’ll remember Herod as the king who had attempted to eliminate Jesus as a rival “king” by killing all male babies born within a two year period of the visit of the magi. (Matthew 2:16.) At the time of the reported visit of Jesus and his disciples, the temple was dedicated to Herod’s son, Philip, who established the city as the administrative center of his government. Philip’s brother Herod Antipas had executed John the Baptizer (Matthew 14:1-11) and was the Herod of Jesus’ trial, according to Luke’s Gospel (23:6-12). By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written at the end of the First Century, the Jewish people reading it likely were aware that the Roman commander who led the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE had returned with his troops to Caesarea Philippi in celebration of their victory, so it had a significant place in their pain and sense of dislocation. (Josephus, *The Jewish War*, (B.J. 7.2.1, 23-24).)

So, Jesus' question—"Who do you say that I am?"—is presented in the midst of the power of the Roman Empire, economic, religious and political, in the times of both the account of the Gospel and its being read almost 100 years later. His question wasn't solely about Jesus' identity; it was a question about who the disciples understood they were following. And that was addressed to the first disciples, and to every generation since then. In fact, it is addressed to us today.

Being a follower of Jesus wasn't easy. The disciples' call tore them away from their families, from their livelihoods, from every part of the existence they had known. And it was going to get worse before it would get better.

Being a disciple isn't easy today, either. The challenges that the first ones faced remind me of what we're coping with today: COVID-19 (the illness and death; the isolation; the temporary end of life as we knew it). Also, there's renewed and continuous public demand for racial equity with occasional violence aimed toward demonstrators and the continuation of coping with police violence in our country. In addition, the economic crash resulting from the COVID-necessitated shut-down of business and industry has devastated our land. Now, it's hurricane season. And the general election is just a little over two months away.

So what are we to do? We can throw up our hands and live as people who don't know Jesus, much less who people say that he is. We can take a hedonistic approach to life, trying to enjoy ourselves as best we can under the circumstances. Or we can remember what Jesus said to Peter: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16:17.) God has revealed God's own self to us, as well. We do know who Jesus is. We understand that, no matter how difficult the challenge of living today is, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, continue to be with us. They give us the energy we need to wash our hands one more time, the discipline to put on the mask again to go to the grocery store, the patience to bear yet another round of political news. They bring the tranquility we need to hear and accept another day's reports of increased deaths and hospitalizations from coronavirus. They prompt us with the initiative to apply for an absentee ballot or to find out when and where early voting will be available to us. They motivate us to look for a new job or to fill out an application for a new benefit we may need. They fill us with the commitment to demonstrate one more day or to have a conversation with someone we don't agree with so that we can achieve common ground and safety for our children. They fill our hearts to endure the evaluation of the proposals we're given for how school will unfold this fall for our children.

This existence we call the “new normal” may be what being a living sacrifice is all about in 2020. And being transformed by our minds to see the path of life in the time of Coronavirus will save us from being conformed to the world of chaos and continuing surprises in which we live. (Romans 12:1-2.)

Like Peter, we say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We know who his people are. We know that they are Father and Holy Spirit and that they are one with him, committed to seeing that we live lives of abundance and grace. We know that the faith that God gives us has created the church, and that it the church is the rock on which we can stand as the foundation of our lives, especially when they seem to be most out of control. We can look to our forbears in faith who have endured challenges equally as daunting as ours today, and they were sustained by their faith in God; they were protected by their God. As the psalmist says, “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart.” (138:1a.)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: AMEN**