

Looking Forward While Remembering The Past
Mark 8:27-38
Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 - 8:1
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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There is a Target television commercial I enjoyed from a few years ago. It starts with loud, festive music and singing — It's the most wonderful time of the year! Men and women are dancing, smiling, beaming—and then we get a shot of the children wearing new backpacks and back to school clothes, looking anything but happy.

Whether you found that a happy prospect or not depended on your perspective. We are in a place that is kind of like that now.

There are lots of things going on today. It is a day of mixed feelings, of looking forward and backwards both, at some beautiful and hopeful things—and some painful memories. It is quite hard to have a sermon that addresses all of them. We just did our blessing of the backpacks. It is Rally Day, the start of the church year — not really, but in essence, this is when we get back to all the studies, small groups, special worship, big initiatives, all the things we like to do as a church.

When you start something new, you have a keynote, a kind of kickoff to get everyone excited for what you are about to do.

And then there is 9/11

I have no interest in talking about 9/11 and for this morning had planned on ignoring it as completely as I could. I am telling you this because as I wrote, and studied, and prayed, and read, it loomed large in the background, and cast a big shadow. I just couldn't get away from it. There is a lot of 9/11 in this sermon, whether I wanted it or not.

Even after considering all those things on our minds today, what we are left with after all of that as the church is probably the only question that matters. The scripture for today is about as foundational as it gets. It is the heart of every one of our Gospels: Just who is this Jesus? A wise man, a good teacher, God in person. The answer matters. There are a lot of ways you could ask this question, a lot of ways to ask it.

Some version of this scene is in all of the gospels, with Mark and Luke being nearly identical. Matthew adds a lot of response, John captures the sense of what has happened but with totally different words. Who do the crowds say that I am? They answer with the names of John and Elijah, and other unnamed but ancient and so presumably impressive prophets. Who knows, maybe Mark left them out because they weren't as impressive as John or Elijah. Be that as it may, it brings us to the central question.

And then he says who do YOU say that I am?

Peter answers, You are the messiah. And in response Jesus says not to tell anyone, strict orders is what it says. In Matthew, Jesus gives a big long answer to Peter. But here, **importantly**, Jesus does not affirm or deny what has been said, only saying to keep it to themselves. Mark has 16 chapters, and here in chapter 8, the exact midpoint, we have posed the question on which all other questions hang.

Jesus is addressing the disciples, and Jesus is particularly addressing Peter. Do not miss what else is happening here! Mark, or whoever wrote these words — Mark is addressing YOU, the reader. When reading the Bible, we sometimes forget that we are reading at all.

These words indeed had an author. When you begin this Gospel, you have more of a sense of reading something that a person wrote: *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.* And from there he goes right into it. The author's entire work and everything he wants

you to know revolves around this all important question — who do you say that I am?

Jesus is addressing **you personally** when you read these texts, breaking the fourth wall in a very real sense. Who do you say that I am?

As your pastor, you are learning that I like to dig around in corners we don't typically go, and today is one of those days. (To make it up to you, we are exploring this most unusual text on the same week we are looking at one of the most famous texts in our history.) But I am pairing this familiar Gospel text with a text from a book you maybe never heard of before. In The Book of Wisdom, or the Wisdom of Solomon, the central theme of the work is "Wisdom" itself, appearing under two principal aspects. It is one of the seven wisdom books in the Old Testament—we do recognize and include the other six, but for some reason protestants don't really use this one. It is included by the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Most Protestants consider it part of the Apocrypha. The lectionary web site that I used occasionally includes these texts as part of the rotation, and so when this one came up I thought what a great opportunity! Let's hear from this ancient source of wisdom.

The book is addressed to the rulers of the earth, urging them to love righteousness and seek wisdom. How could I NOT want to put more of THAT into the world. The reading uses these words: *For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.* So right there, in that bastion of patriarchy, the Old Testament, God is now explained to us in feminine terms. That is worth saying all by itself. She is also telling us that wisdom is a spotless mirror of God. We sometimes say that God is love, and perhaps we could also say that God is wisdom.

This reading goes on, saying that *she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.* She renews all things, in every generation. The work of God's wisdom is for US specifically, and not simply a copy and paste from what worked well in the past, because what worked well in the past sometimes just doesn't cut it for us living our lives here and now.

This gets me pretty much to the core of what's on my heart this week. When we talk about 9/11, one big thing we say is never forget.

Never forget what? I had a hard time coming up with some words remembering that time, and a friend pointed me towards someone else's words that I share with you now:

Where were you when the world stopped turning on that September day?

Were you in the yard with your wife and children

Or working on some stage in L.A.?

Did you stand there in shock at the sight of that black smoke

Risin' against that blue sky?

Did you shout out in anger, in fear for your neighbor

Or did you just sit down and cry?

Did you weep for the children who lost their dear loved ones

And pray for the ones who don't know?

Did you rejoice for the people who walked from the rubble

And sob for the ones left below?

Did you burst out with pride for the red, white and blue

And the heroes who died just doin' what they do?

Did you look up to heaven for some kind of answer

And look at yourself and what really matters?

They are by country musician Alan Jackson, and I think they do a good job capturing the blend of feelings so many people had, all at once.

I remember people helping other people. I remember for a moment that the whole world lamented this violence, and that for a moment we really, deeply cared about one another. There's a lot that happened 20 years ago, but for me, that's the part I intend to never forget. You've all heard the famous quote from Fred Rogers,

that when you see scary things in the news, to look for the helpers, that there are always people who want to help. He actually came out of retirement in 2001 after 9/11 in order to make a series of public service announcements, which is where we get that famous adage, to look for the helpers.

In the face of overwhelming fear, a glimmer of optimism. THAT is a choice. With overwhelming fear everywhere around you, no one blames you if you choose fear. But it takes some courage to choose optimism, to see that there are a few people helping, even when they are very much the minority, and let that be the lesson. I guess one thing that really gets me about that coming together is that for about a week, many of our ongoing divisions went away. Caring for one another was more important than who you supported politically, and **of course** it devolved into over the top politics and scapegoating and power games, and **of course** it devolved into terrible racism and islamophobia and xenophobia. But for a moment, all that was set aside, and compassion was embraced.

The churches were very full right after 9/11. Who do you say that I am? Lots and lots of people suddenly found that a very relevant question, and so they came to the churches looking for an answer. Where did all those people go? I think the churches blew it. When you have so many people coming to you, and they stop coming, they must have decided that what you were offering wasn't helpful to them, didn't matter in their real lives.

Today we begin our fall programming schedule. I pray that all of you find it a good use of your time—and if not, I pray you help us find better ways to use this time, helping you grow and mature in your Christian faith. I think centering your life around Jesus is about as relevant to your life as it gets, and I pray that in the coming year we find effective ways to articulate just why it is that Jesus matters. We want a healthier church, we want to include more people—I think articulating why centering your life around Jesus is maybe the only way to get there.

One of the books we are about to begin studying is about *God and the Pandemic*, which to me is about as relevant as it gets. Our most conservative estimates are that in the pandemic just in America, we've lost more than 200 times as many people as were lost at 9/11. Yet those people are not coming to us looking for answers. Let's look and see what we can learn from this moment.

The scripture tells us that *In every generation, wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets*, that's what the Book of Wisdom says. If wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, then were they already holy? If so, what's the point of becoming friends with God? I think that is very relevant to us, as we kick off a new year in the church. After all, we are God's people—so a very big question is where do we go from here? God, you got us in the door—now what is your will for your people? I look around, and I think the answer might be that we are to be God's balm to a hurting world.

One of the really big questions is why bad things happen. While we as a nation were still processing unimaginable calamity, people stopped hurting each other for just a moment. That is a big step towards God's kingdom being lived out in this world—not that nothing bad ever happens, but rather than no one needs to face it alone—that we all have each other supporting one another, and that God is always in that mix. That is a vision of what we are supposed to be doing, right? Making the kingdom of God a reality? Let us look backwards, and let us learn. I think maybe we honor the lives lost by living better lives ourselves.

And today, the blessing of the backpacks. What a symbol of a new beginning! Starting a new grade in school honors what has been accomplished, while building on it. We look forward with the backpack blessing. We plan for a good new school year, and we are willing to do the work to ensure it will be as positive as possible for all concerned.

It shows we are well equipped for what lies ahead, and it reminds all of us that we are in this together. Students, remember that all of these people here love you and pray for you. They remember what it was like to be in school, and that sometimes it

is really hard. Congregants, look at these students and be reminded that we have a future, and while we are willing to do our part, we are intentionally putting that future into God's hands.

Who do you say that I am? Some say you are Elijah, or John, both important people from the past. But who do you say that I am? You are the messiah, here to lead us into a better future, and to inspire us to bring along as many with us as we can.

May it be so. Amen.