

Who Do You Say I am?
Fourth in a Lenten Series

“...and now I am going to tell you who you are, really are.”

Matthew 16:17 MSG

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It is hard to know what to say to you during these challenging times. It is hard to know the exact words to use. So, I begin with these words of Jesus: “Peace I leave you. My peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27

Prayer - Dear God, reveal in and through our time together, your wisdom, strength, and peace. Draw us near and help us to listen. Amen

Message - Great moments are born from great opportunity. So said Kurt Russell in the movie Miracle when the US Hockey Team went up against Russia for the gold. Courage provides great opportunity. This we know from the countless stories throughout history of people who were brave and courageous.

People like Withold Pilecki, a Polish soldier who in 1940, volunteered to join a German roundup so he could report on what was going on inside a new concentration camp called Auschwitz.

Or Jeremiah Denton, an American prisoner of war in Vietnam, who signaled the abuse that POW's were suffering by blinking, in a propaganda video, the message TORTURE in Morse code.

And Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad and then risked reenslavement and death returning to the South on at least 19 trips to guide as many as 300 enslaved Americans to freedom.

These persons faced tremendous pressure, and they responded with grace. They responded with courage.

Hemingway said that courage is about guts and what he meant by that, according to a profile in *The New Yorker*, is that guts is all about showing grace under pressure.

What about today? These are chaotic times. These are anxious times. These are unsettled times. There are moments of fear. There are moments of fluctuating information. There are moments of wondering what tomorrow will bring.

I don't think any of us gathered today, imagined the kind of pressure felt around the world due to the Coronavirus. It is a pressure weighted with uncertainty, conflicting information, distorted views, opposing responses, and confusing data. It is a pressure that has many people scared, even paralyzed with anxiety and fear. Others are angry and shaking their fists looking for someone to blame. Some are overwhelmed and simply trying to figure out what to do day to day, hour by hour. Others are still in a state of shock wondering how it could possibly be happening or how can it be this bad? And in just the last few days, there are those pockets of people trying to spread joy from their car windows and front porches.

There are defining moments in human history; moments that change us forever. World War II, Vietnam, acts of terror like 9/11, The Great Depression, the Spanish flu pandemic, the polio epidemic, and now the impact of Covid19. People around the world will never be the same.

We are in unprecedented territory. Governor Holcomb stated it this way, "These are times that try our souls." And that is why, now more than ever we need to be community. We need to be church. We need to know who we are and stay grounded in Jesus.

Over the last four weeks, we have trekked the path of Lent seeking the answer to the question, “who we are as individuals and as a church.” Little did we know when we planned this series, we would find ourselves in a pandemic and need to cling to our identity in Christ and as a church in ways we hadn’t thought of.

Now it is going to seem a little backdoor, but this week, we explore the answer to the identity question by responding to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus had been with the disciples for three years. They had traveled many miles together, walked many dusty roads, witnessed many miracles, and heard many teachings. They saw with their own eyes what Jesus was about, what he was capable of, how he treated people, taught people, changed people, challenged people, and loved people.

AND YET they struggled to answer Jesus’ question “Who do you say I am?” and know Jesus as the Son of God. (Matthew 16:15) They still wrestled to grasp the kind of suffering and death Jesus told them he had to endure. And what they would endure as his followers once he was gone. (Matthew 16:21) They could not comprehend God’s purpose made manifest in Jesus.

Who do you say that I am? It is the key question, I believe, to knowing our identity - to knowing who we are. Jesus turns to us, like he did to his disciples, looks us in the eye, and asks: READ TEXT / Matt. 16:13-20

Before we address the question and their response, It is significant to note the location of Jesus and his disciples when this question is asked. Jesus had taken his disciples about a two day walk away from where they were. Anytime Jesus takes his followers away, or for a time apart, we need to pay attention.

They went to the districts or areas of Caesarea Philippi. This was a place outside of the domain of Herod Antipas, who was the ruler of Galilee and within

the area of Philip the Tetrarch. The population was mainly non-Jewish and therefore, Jesus would have a little peace and quiet to teach his followers.

His time was short; his days in the flesh were numbered. He needed to know if there was anyone in his closest circle, who knew what he was doing. Who he truly was and what he was about. He needed to know because they were the ones who would carry on with his message and teaching.

There were few districts with more religious associations than Caesarea Philippi. Here was an area scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian Baal worship. It was an area where the breath of ancient religion and idol worship was in everything and everywhere.

Not only Syrian gods but there was also a deep cavern that was thought to be the birthplace of the great god Pan, the god of nature. The legends of the gods of Greece gathered around Caesarea Philippi. Finally there was a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar. It had been built by Herod of the Great.

So here is Jesus, a homeless, penniless Galilaen carpenter, with twelve very ordinary people around him. Furthermore, at that moment the orthodox Jews / Pharisees and religious leaders in and around Jerusalem were actually plotting and planning to destroy him as a dangerous heretic.

Jesus stands in an area littered with the temples of the Syrian gods; in a place where the ancient Greek gods looked down; in a place where the history of Israel crowded in upon the minds of men; where the white marble splendour of the home of Caesar- worship dominated the landscape and compelled the eye.

It represented all the unknowns, uncertainty, and unrest that his disciples would face. It symbolized all the things they had no control over; messages and teachings that opposed theirs, and situations or circumstances they never thought they would encounter.

I wonder people of God, are we in such a place now?

There of all places, with the backdrop I just described, Jesus stands before his followers and asks his question. By doing so, he finds out there is at least one who knows he is the Son of God, AND he gives them a way to know who they are.

When Jesus asked his followers, who do you say that I am, he was asking do you get it yet? Are you with me? Do you realize what all this means? If so, what does your life say about who I am? In other words, how does your life answer the question?

What does your attitude under stress say about who I am? What does your response to pressure say about who I am? What does your response to the unrest, uncertainty, and unknown around you say about who I am?

Who is Jesus when we are afraid?

Who is Jesus when we are isolated from one another the way that we are?

Who is Jesus when we face wave after wave of conflicting information?

Who is Jesus in the midst of Covid19?

Knowing the answer to who Jesus is is what provides us comfort in a time of discomfort. It provides a way when there seems to be no way. It is the assurance and peace we need in times of uncertainty and chaos.

What does all this have to do with our identity? The answer to who we say Jesus is is revealed in the living out of our days. It is exposed in how we respond to one another and circumstances around us, and how we stay connected without being physically together.

Jesus' identity is revealed in us and in turn our identity is found in Jesus.

Jesus is the smile shared through the window or on facebook live to a loved one or friend.

Jesus is the box of food delivered through the car window at the local food pantry.

Jesus is Soups On carry-out style.

Jesus is our children's director offering worship online for our kids and families, our youth director setting up youth group online.

Jesus is the church at worship, no matter what that worship might look like.

Jesus is the willingness of those not at risk to get groceries and medicine for those who are.

In these uncertain and unprecedented times, in this moment, the answer to Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?" is found in you.

Yes Jesus is the son of God. Yes Jesus is Savior and Lord, Redeemer and friend. Yes Jesus is the one in whom we trust. AND Jesus is you and me, and all of us serving together, bringing the spirit of hope, comfort, assurance, grace and peace to life for those around us.

If we have to do that over the internet, with facebook, or instagram, we will. If we have to do it with gloves or a mask on and repetitive use of hand sanitizer, we will. Even if we have to do it while being socially distant, we will. Because, that is who Jesus is therefore that is who we are.

Jesus' identity is revealed in us and in turn our identity is found in Jesus. Do not lose hope, church. Do not lose hope, people of God. Do not lose hope Franklin, Indiana. Hang in there students and teachers. Hang in there parents and local workers. Know that you are not alone and together we will be who we are; the hands, the feet and the presence of Jesus. AMEN