

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

“Who do you say that I am?” This is a profound question, that I think we all are blessed to spend time on over and over in our lives. How do we perceive the divine within and among us? Who do we say our saviour, our sovereign, is?

In the context of today’s Lectionary readings, we are given one answer, and maybe even one or two more questions from Jesus’ conversation with his disciples. From the Hebrew Bible, we have a passage from Isaiah that may sound familiar to our ears: we read it during Lent and Holy Week as we contemplate Jesus’ passion and death on the cross. This passage from Isaiah, paired with Jesus’ conversation with his disciples, is a reminder that even for those closest to him, it was hard for the disciples to accept that “Messiah” ultimately meant something entirely different that they had imagined. Jesus was not going to be a conquering, warrior king like his ancestor David; Jesus was the embodied God who longed for God’s children to return to the way of love that God intended for them. And this meant that the Messiah would give a pattern of living through his teaching

and healing; but would not by force, or threat, or with a sweep of an almighty arm simply make the world into what God wanted it to be. Jesus would ultimately submit to the fearful, violent impulses of those in authority who wanted to retain the power they had gained in the world. Jesus' sovereignty would be one of overwhelming, transgressive love that resurrected life out of death.

God loves and invites and encourages; God does not coerce. God still sets free God's creation to be at one with God, or to unwisely follow our own fallible will and live under the sovereignty of our ego, rather than under the sovereignty of God. Jesus tells his disciples this when he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" But let's back up a little in our Gospel lesson; because I think Jesus is also working on our faith in another way.

After Peter boldly states that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus sternly orders his disciples to tell no one. Why would Jesus demand that no one be told

about him? I think Jesus understands that in order for us to have a deep and lasting faith, we must come to know him in our own way, and to come to know God in our own way. The reality of God in our lives is not something that can simply be told to us; we must attune our hearts and our minds to experience the reality of God ourselves. We must, on some level, have our own revelations of the divine; it takes time and intention and an open heart and a questioning mind, but God is ever present, ever on the verge of revelation to us. And Jesus is opening the way to that revelation for each of his disciples by forbidding anyone to simply repeat what Peter has said. They all need to come to know the answer to “Who do you say that I am?” for themselves, rather than as hearsay or doctrine. Their understanding of what it means to have the Anointed One, the Messiah, in their midst will be a very personal journey each of them will undertake.

The good news is that when each of the disciples, and each of us, undertake this journey toward understanding what it means to have the Messiah in our lives, we are not alone. We are able to ask again and again, but who do I, right now, say that God is, and turn to our sisters, brothers, and siblings to have our understanding challenged, renewed and deepened. Who am I saying that God is right this minute? Is my god my

worry? Is my god my fear? Is my god my certainty in my own knowledge? Is my god my own desire above all else and all others? When I look at my own day-to-day living right now, who does my way of being tell the world my god is?

And here is the grace in the challenging question, “Who do you say that I am?”: “...those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” When we seriously, intentionally, and continually examine who is sovereign in our lives, we can begin to answer that question not just in words but in deeds. And as we constantly ask “Who do I say that God is?” God answers by telling us who we are. Peter, for all that he boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, still had a long journey of doubt and failure, self-examination and restoration before he was even remotely ready for the Spirit to set fire in him on the day of Pentecost. And even after that, Peter still had to question himself again and again, “Who do I say God is?” He learned that God is a God who shows no partiality, a God who showers God’s Holy Spirit on Jew and Gentile alike. And Peter learned who he was in God’s eyes. Peter was no longer the impulsive, speak-before-you-think, betrayer of Jesus; Peter was a leader in the movement Jesus began in his earthly ministry; Peter was the preacher of

the good news, the healer who restored wholeness to those who sought it. Losing his life for the sake of the Gospel was a long undertaking for Peter; and it is for us, too. But we partake of salvation, we save our very lives, when we lose the false gods of ego, fear, worry, certainty, and control, and instead allow the Anointed One, the embodiment of overwhelming love, to be revealed to us and in us.

“Who do you say that I am?” How is the divine revealed within and among us? Who do we say our saviour, our sovereign, is? Take up the challenge Jesus gave his disciples; to know God, creator, incarnate and Holy Spirit for yourself, and not just as a teaching that you’ve heard. God is ever present and ever inviting. Listen; be still and listen deeply; allow God to tell you who you are; God’s reality is always breaking into our lives and shaking us out of the dim and fruitless pursuit of gaining the world while we lose our soul. Gracious is God, and full of compassion as we undertake the journey of losing our egos for the sake of the Gospel. God is with us to rescue our lives from death, our eyes from tears, our feet from stumbling. Take up the cross and find your life, find out who you are and who God is. Continue the disciples’ journey of co-creating the holy reign of God, a reign of

overwhelming love that resurrects life from death, and restores us to the divine image in which we were created. Amen.