

## 12 Sunday after Pentecost A

Psalm 138

Matthew 16:13-20

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

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*23rd Sunday of Social Distancing*

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Grace and peace to you from the Messiah.

It's not just a historical question, but a contemporary one as we hear Jesus ask, "what do people say about who the Chosen One is?"

It's a question that, as Luther Seminary professor Audrey West<sup>1</sup> puts it, is not simply about getting an answer correct on a messianic quiz. Here we are faced with a far deeper invitation than first appears, an invitation that dares to change the way we live in our own skin and in the world.

The gospel writers were very adept at layering their stories in a way that added incredible richness and meaning to be mined. They included subtle references to place, references to ancient stories, symbolism – all as means to communicate beyond what only the words on the page stated. For example, this story takes place in Caesarea Philippi, a geographical reference that eludes to something more than a pin on a map. Caesarea Philippi was a hub of commerce, trade, politics, economics, and power. It is here, with the business of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century world bustling all around them, that Jesus asks his followers, "what are people saying about me?" and "what do you say about me?" As West describes, he's really asking:

*In what or in whom will the followers of Jesus place their trust?  
Will it be in the privileges deriving from access to opportunity  
and wealth? In the worship of a prevailing culture's latest idols?  
In allegiance to the dominant power of earthly rulers?  
Or will they trust, instead, in the One whose life, death, and  
resurrection reveal the mercy and justice of the living God?*

The city of Caesarea Philippi embodies the choice before them. With all that the Apostles had faced, through miracles, healings, leadership confrontations, personal challenges, Jesus is asking, will they follow the ways of the world or the ways of God? Will they trust him as they move forward after his death and resurrection, trusting that even then God still abided with them?

He asks, because the troubles of life were not going to come to an end. Following Christ isn't some magic formula that makes life easy. And the temptation for them to throw in the towel and return to their old ways of

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4557](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4557)

thinking was real. Jesus' asking "who do you say that I am?" was at the same time asking them to pause and ponder "who do you say you are?"

So, it's a transformative question. Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Living God was a recognition that his life was entrusted into God's care and that at every intersection going forward this new understanding would shape his thinking, decisions, purpose, and interactions.

For all of the Apostles, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, they came to understand that their lives were valued differently than what they were used to. No longer did they see their worth dependent upon how many fish they caught and sold, or how well they climbed the social ladder, or even whether they had the popular brand of sandals and tunic. They were important, loved, respected, valued because God loved them. That understanding would nourish them through the very difficult times to come.

It took time to trust this love. It sounds like a simple statement to make (we say God loves you a lot!) but truthfully to live it is very difficult. Jesus minced no words as he asked these things in the midst of a busy urban center. Turning away from all that we have come to know as measurements of "success" is challenging – *and it's also lifegiving.*

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One time I responded to a woman's call who was feeling very down. In fact (and this is a trigger warning) she was feeling suicidal. If this is a trigger for you please turn down your sound and I'll wave you back into the video in a moment.

Linda<sup>2</sup> and I had been journeying together in prayer and healing as she left another denomination and began to discover grace. We had met many, many times. But that day was a hard one and she called, at the end of her ability to cope. I picked her up and we drove around for quite some time talking. It's not the usual approach, but knowing her well, I said to her "Linda, I don't really think you want to end your life." She protested, and asked how I could possibly know, to which I said, "you put on your seatbelt."

She paused and then broke out in great bursts of tears and laughter. As I joined her it was like a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God who drew us together and called us to affirm trust in the Creator and hope for a new day.

<sup>2</sup> This name has been changed to protect privacy.

Linda realized in that moment that she didn't want to die. She wanted to learn to trust in the God who loved her. She was on a journey of transformation to learn she was worth that love – and not the kind of love the world offers, but what we call “agape” love, the unconditional love of Christ.

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In this year, 2020, the concept of God's agape love is balm to our weary souls. As we struggle to make sense of all that is happening, as we fear losing our jobs, our friendships, our loved ones, as we look anxiously toward September and worry about what will happen for students and teachers, as we grieve the loss of the way we used to live, as we struggle to understand oppression and privilege, as we try to care for creation, our footing is best founded on the bedrock we know so well – this living God who is beside us in it all.

As we grow into our new identity, as I said at the outset, we dare to change the way we live in our own skin and in the world...

- We begin to care for the poor and oppressed. This might mean we learn about the unhelpful policies and practices that we have long held which sustain the gaps between us,
- We begin to employ (rather than shun) science as we care for the environment and adapt our means of travel, power, and water consumption,
- We recognize the messages in and power of media making use of these resources with wisdom and care, teaching our children discernment of what goes into their bodies and minds.
- We pause to reflect on our place in the equation of oppression and privilege, with a willingness to allow the Spirit to mend what is broken.
- We breathe through the fears we carry, reminding one another that no matter what we face, we are not alone. We are a community steeped in the eternity of God.
- We encourage one another as we journey through joy or challenge, building a broad and welcoming family.

These are just some beginning thoughts. Any transformation will be based on trust, which is the bedrock upon which the community of faith is founded. It is the attitude, the commitment, the loving dedication to God and one another that will make a difference in the world, not the institutions, politics, investments, latest fashions or even the latest technology.

Jesus asks for our trust, not in the way of a political leader or as a power move, or even to garner a critical mass of devotees, but our trust, our

commitment is invited as we embark on a journey of re-visioning ourselves and the world. Amen.