

What Impact?

“I give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart!” The psalmist sings praises to God; God has answered the psalmist’s call. God has strengthened the psalmist’s resolve. God has walked with the psalmist in the midst of trouble, delivering him from his enemies. The psalmist proclaims, “God’s steadfast love endures forever!”

If you were writing your own psalm, how would you describe God? How has God been active in your life? Would you proclaim God’s praise and thanksgiving with your whole heart, as the psalmist did? “I give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart!”

As we turn to the Gospel of Matthew this morning, we find Jesus and his disciples in the district of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus wanted to know what others were saying about him, so he asked his disciples, “Who do the people say that I am.” The psalmist answered who is God? And now Jesus wants to know who people say that he is. But, Jesus didn’t settle with what the others think. Jesus looked directly into the eyes of his disciples and asked, “But, who do you say that I am?” Yes, “Who do you say that I am,” asks Jesus of each one of us. Listen now for the Word of God to us this morning through the Gospel of Matthew, as we allow Jesus’ question to his disciples to be directed to each one of us.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

In these past two weeks, our congregation has experienced the deaths of Lois Bohlman and Eleanor Merritt. As families gather, stories will be told. I remember vividly, my three older brothers and one younger sister gathering after the respective deaths of our two parents. We gathered to share memories and stories of our parents. In recalling those occasions, it was amazing to me how varied our memories and stories were. It was also interesting to reflect on how different we each saw our parents. Of course, with a little over 15 years between the oldest and the youngest, I am sure my parents grew in their parenting skills by the time my sister and I showed up!

I would listen to my older brothers describe a dad who had loved to wrestle with them, but who also had a firm hand and a cat-o-nine tails for discipline when they got out of line. On the other hand, my sister and I knew a dad who was as soft as a marshmallow. Sure, he could lay down the law with a very firm, “Girls, that is enough,” but mostly he enjoyed buying us special dresses, combing my sister’s beautifully long hair, cheering us on as we played softball or encouraging us in whatever our endeavors.

My brothers knew they could frustrate our mom, until she'd cry out, "Wait until your father gets home." Well, I have been told I didn't push the limits, so I never heard my mom say those words to me! I loved to be in the kitchen with my mom, but my younger sister didn't find her encouraging in the kitchen at all. Our memories and stories of our mom differed, yet we all agreed that our mom was a woman of many talents, one who could sew, needle weave and crochet just about anything in the evening, after assembling the hydraulics of airplanes during the day. My parents, Ray and Ruth, were wonderful people, yet each of their five children saw them through their own respective lens.

Is it any wonder then that when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am," that the answers were varied? "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

By the 16th chapter of Matthew, where our text for today is found, Jesus had become widely known for his teaching and healing ministry. Like a Jewish rabbi, he went from town to town, teaching about the ways of God. The Sermon on the Mount had drawn crowds; he had cleansed a leper, healed a centurion's servant, stilled a storm, cast out demons, healed a paralytic, healed the blind and the mute, fed five thousand and walked on water. Jesus had called his disciples and traveled with his disciples teaching and healing, with great crowds following him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. People from all walks of life experienced Jesus and then expressed to his disciples their experience of him.

I wonder how people would answer this question about you. If your friends, your family, your coworkers, or others were asked, "Who do they say you are? What would they say; would they capture the real you?"

This past year the Presbyterian Women's Bible Study spent nine months exploring the question, "Who is Jesus?" It was an incredibly fascinating study, because it answered this question from multiple perspectives, just like asking many different people from various aspects of your life to describe you.

In the opening study, Rev. Dr. Judy Yates Siker asks, "What do we mean when we say, 'Jesus the Christ'?" She answers, "We mean exactly the same thing as 'Jesus the Messiah,' as Christ and Messiah both mean 'anointed one.'" Christ is from a Greek word that means anointed one, whereas Messiah is from a Hebrew word that means anointed one.

Dr. Siker writes, "From Matthew's opening lines to his closing lines, Matthew is a Jewish Gospel for a Jewish audience." The Gospel was written after the Jewish War, after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. Matthew writes this gospel in the wake of this destruction, as Judaism seeks a faithful way forward without the temple and its sacrificial system.

When Peter answers Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi, "But, who do you say that I am?" Peter responds from his Jewish heritage to a Jewish audience, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," for in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is the long awaited Jewish messiah whose teaching opens the kingdom of heaven to us here and now."

I find it fascinating that Jesus went to the district of Caesarea Philippi to ask this question of his disciples. Let me describe what I saw when I visited this place in Israel. It was a cloudy and rainy day. The spring that emerges from a large cave was rushing with water. We learned historically that beginning in 3rd century B.C.E., there were offerings to the Greek god

Pan. Pan is the half-man, half-goat god that is often depicted playing the flute. The city near the spring, which was known in ancient times as Pnias, is now called by the Arabic for of this name, Banias. Adjacent to the sacred cave was a rocky escarpment with a series of hewn niches. Rain poured at one point over these niches that once held statues of deities such as Echo, the mountain nymph and escort of Pan, and Pan's father, Hermes.

This place, known as the head waters for the River Jordan, was a place steeped in centuries of pagan worship. It was where competing gods vied for the allegiance of men and women. This is the place where Jesus didn't settle for what others said about him, but where he pressed his disciples saying, "But, who do you say that I am?"

Where would Jesus take you to ask you this question today? Would Jesus take you to the floor of the New York stock exchange where the gods of wealth and the appetite for more reside? Would Jesus ask you in the safety of your home where the gods of comfort and security clamor for your allegiance? Would Jesus take you to a neighborhood where you feel unsure and maybe even unsafe, where the gods of fear and separation and exclusion scream for your attention? Would Jesus show up at your place of employment, where the gods of position, power, prestige and recognition gnaw at your soul? Would God show up in your gym or your beauty salon, where the gods of vanity and fear of what other people think show up? What other gods with a little "g" are competing for your allegiance... like Pan, Echo or Hermes, like wealth, comfort, vanity, exclusion or power?

You see, simply declaring that "Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God," is not enough for you and me. Listen again to the wise words of Dr. Siker, for she writes, "Jesus uses parables [in the Gospel of Matthew] to teach his disciples... [that] they are the ones who will be carrying out the work of the kingdom after Jesus is gone."

The disciples, as well as you and me, are the ones who will be carrying out the work of the kingdom after Jesus is gone. Jesus' prayer that he taught to his disciples describes kingdom work that God's will be done on 'earth as it is in heaven.'" You see, the question is not just, "Who do say that I am," but also, "What impact does our declaration have for our own lives and for the life of this church?"

If we confess like Peter, in the midst of all other competing gods clamoring for our attention, "Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of a living God," what do we mean? What impact does this confession have on our day to day lives?

How has your life been different since claiming Jesus, as the Messiah? I know mine has taken twists and turns I never imagined! From taking hard earned vacation time from my corporate job to travel with 50 high schoolers across the country for 10 days to attend the Youth Triennium, a national youth event; to setting aside my disdain of guns to being a police chaplain for twelve years, where I rode along with officers in their police units; to leaving the corporate setting as an engineering manager, to becoming a pastor. From saying that all is mine, to saying, "God, how can the gifts you have given me be a blessing to others". Saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God, has impacted my life and will continue to impact life, as I focus my heart on kingdom work.

Kingdom work... God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Kingdom work... cultivating the fruit of the Spirit among all people - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Kingdom work...rejoicing in hope, being patient in

suffering, contributing to the saints, extending hospitality to a stranger. Kingdom work... proclaiming the gospel and bearing witness of the living God in your own experience.

Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." "The rock is not Peter," writes commentator Jin Kim. The rock is Peter's testimony of Jesus. Jin Kim continues, writing, "The church is as resilient or as fragile as each of us in our own faith," as each of us in our own testimonies.

Yet, the history of Christianity attests to how vulnerable we are to complacency as Christians, because it is too easy for us to rest on someone else's testimony. We hear only Peter's testimony, while we know that other disciples were present. We leave testimony to the pastors, missionaries or others in our midst, rather than telling our own stories of God at work in our lives. We get so busy or so distracted, we forget that the kingdom is here and now, and that the work of the kingdom is ours to do through the church.

I agree with Jin Kim that the rock is not Peter, but Peter's testimony that builds the church. His testimony of God at work through the prophet Joel, and through King David and through himself as he testified to Christ as both Lord and Messiah on Pentecost. The rock, today, here and now, is each one of us together as the church, for the church is as resilient or as fragile as each of us in our own faith.

Now you might remember that our passage ended with Jesus sternly ordering his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. You might feel this is reason enough for you to be quiet about your faith. We have to remember context. This exchange between Jesus and his disciples took place during those dangerous days before going to Jerusalem. We know that Christ has suffered, died and risen, for we are post Resurrection and Pentecost people. After Pentecost, proclaiming the gospel became the primary work of Christ's church! Our primary work as a church is proclaiming the gospel for impact on others and our community!

And so I ask this pressing question to all of us this morning: What impact will your faith and our collective faith as a church have on our community? Let's learn to recognize and tell our stories of faith, of God with us, for us and working through us, for there is much kingdom work to be done here and now! Amen.