



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

THE MESSIAH

Part 1 of a Pentecost sermon series: “But who do you say that I am?”

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2015

Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33; Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-8:1; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Sermon text: Jesus asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” Mark 8:29

Yesterday was “Community Day” here in Millbrook. Lots of people up and down Franklin Ave. walking, talking, sharing their good works. It exactly one year ago that I arrived here—and was pleasantly surprised by Community Day. I thought then—and know now—what a welcoming and active village Millbrook is, and what a wonderful church we have here—amazing Grace.

The following Sunday I began my service here, and started off that first Pentecost season with an extended sermon series on Moses and the story of Exodus. We ended up printing the sermons together with the children’s artwork and questions under the title *Bread for the Journey*. We still have a few copies left if you would like one (see Maria).

I propose this year to do another Pentecost sermon series, this time on the New Testament. I will take as the overall title, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*

The title refers to a text from this morning’s gospel portion. Jesus is walking with the disciples around the villages of Caesarea Philippi—on a sort of a break after an intense period of new ministry in which large crowds gathered to see this new wonder working rabbi. In a moment of reflection, Jesus asks his close disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They reply that many consider Jesus to be a new prophet—or the return of an older one, John the Baptist or Elijah.

“But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks them.

“The Messiah,” Peter replies.

Right you are, Peter—though not exactly in the way you think.

He was thinking of the common understanding of who the Messiah is or will be at the time: a new David, a new powerful king to come and deliver the people of Israel from subjugation under Rome and corrupt rulers.

The word *Messiah* means anointed one in Hebrew; the Greek form is *Christus*. In the Old Testament the word is used even of Cyrus, emperor of Persia, who defeated the Babylonians and let the Israelites return to Canaan. One who is sent by God to free the people. A Messiah is a God-appointed liberator.

Free which people? and from what? Just the Israelites, just from foreign domination?

That is not what Jesus came to do. That much is made clear when he tells the disciples not tell anybody about his identity, but then says that the Son of man—another Old Testament title for a divinely sent being—must be rejected by the authorities, killed, and then rise again.

That is not what Peter had in mind and he tells Jesus so. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus angrily shoots back; you are not getting the message. Keep your eyes focused on the heavenly kingdom coming near and not on merely earthly triumph and power. Jesus is a new kind of Messiah. He will even overcome death and inaugurate the kingdom of God. The Anointed One is also the Risen One. And the kingdom will include all things in heaven and earth.

Now, despite this new cosmic-scale interpretation on what being the Messiah means, the Messiah remains a liberator, still sent by God to deliver the people from the bondage of slavery and sin, to heal the sick and raise up the oppressed and outcast. This is the main biblical theme of freedom and justice that liberation theology has raised up and made the main focus. My first systematics professor in seminary at Union was James Cone, the founder of black liberation theology, along with folks from South America, among the first to talk about God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Pope Francis was schooled in this tradition—and just today I read a snippet of a speech in which he talked about mother Earth as one of the marginal and excluded ones needing to be lifted up. I was reminded of St Paul’s image of earth is groaning as if in labor, waiting for the delivery of the children of God (Romans 8:21-23).

Jesus came as poor child among poor people, the king as a commoner, the messiah cloaked as a wandering rabbi. God with us, Emmanuel.

But our poverty and oppression is not only material and earthly but spiritual and moral. Our greatest fear is death—and that fear is used to keep people subjugated through the threat and use of violence. But Jesus came to deliver us even from this fear, to show us through his suffering, death and resurrection that life is eternal, because there is a divine life beyond our mortal one, a divine energy we can participate in even now. And through participation and faith in this life—through trusting and following this leader—we can overcome our fear, and our other forms of personal bondage and be free in spirit. We are able then to have the courage to sacrifice our own life for the sake of the kingdom, like the students who risked their own lives to integrate the south in the period of “freedom rides” of the early sixties. Mobs surrounded them, they were beaten and their bus firebombed. But they pressed on with nonviolent action, because they had faith in God and a cause that was just.

But how about us today? What do you think? For what are you willing to sacrifice your life? Who do you say Jesus is?

This is an important question and one I will invite you to reflect on various ways in these next ten or eleven weeks. You may be a firm believer already, like Peter—though perhaps still a bit unclear on the teachings of the master. You may be more of a skeptic, like Thomas, or just coming around, with lots of questions, like Nicodemus

When I came back to this church, these doors, some twenty-four years ago, I had many questions that I needed answered before I could take the baptismal vows to follow Christ as Lord and Savior on behalf of my son Elias. I thought then of Jesus as a teacher, a prophet, a holy man. But divine Son of God? born of a virgin? At the time I could not say with understanding and commitment the articles of faith we regularly recite each week when we say the Nicene Creed. Perhaps you are the same.

I have come a long way in my understanding and grasp of faith in God and discipleship to Jesus in the years since. It is a new year now—Rosh Hashanah and a new school and church program year. Let's start a new walk together. Wherever you are in your journey of faith, I welcome you to join me—join us—as we journey with Christ. Talking and walking, living and working with Jesus is the way he himself taught the first disciples. The classroom was the world. Judging from the gospel of Mark, the first disciples often had a very limited understanding of what their teacher and master was teaching and showing them. But in the end they caught on. It took a few days—Good Friday through Easter Sunday—for the final teaching to take place—and it took many days and years before the implications of that tremendous world-altering event could even begin to be unpacked and made into the stories and the creeds of the church.

So don't worry. You are not alone, wherever you are. God is with us. We are the people of God and followers of Jesus the Messiah—even though sometimes we don't know it or act like it. The world is being slowly renewed, healed, brought back into right relationship—even though sometimes it looks like it is going straight to hell. Maybe things have to go wrong before they get right. Maybe we have to die before we truly live. Maybe we have to give love in order to truly receive it. Maybe we have to trust God and follow his Anointed One.

What do you think? Who do you say that Jesus is?

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