

Who Do You Say I Am?
By Jason Huff
Psalm 132:10-18, Acts 13:26-33, Luke 9:18-27

This morning's final Scripture reading is from Luke 9:18-27. Listen now to God's Word. "Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."

It's perhaps the deepest question Jesus ever asks. It's the one that makes me as a pastor nervous. It's the question that we have a hard time answering honestly because we're not sure our lives back up what we say. It's that question that Jesus asked his disciples... "who do you say I am?" Today's section of Scripture may be the most relevant one to our lives we may ever read. Because how we answer that question shapes the whole of our lives.

When Jesus asks the disciples this question, they are out in prayer. Most of the time up until now, Jesus has prayed alone. But after their missionary journey, Jesus often takes his disciples with Him to His prayer times. He still has His personal time with the Father, but His disciples are listening and learning and praying too. They've had a time of conversation with God. And so it's the perfect time to get down to the core of the matter. Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is.

The disciples' answers show us that the crowds are divided. They don't know what to think of Jesus. All of them place him with the prophets. Some who don't know Jesus' history think that, somehow, He might be John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others think that He's the resurrection of Elijah, which would be a pretty good guess. Of all the prophets, Elijah was the one most known for performing miracles, and it was foretold that someone would precede God's chosen one in the spirit and power of Elijah. Others thought that Jesus had to be some other prophet of old. But all of them stop short of the truth. Jesus certainly was a prophet, one who told the truth of God boldly with knowledge and foresight, but he was far more.

Peter, on the other hand, answers that Jesus is the Christ of God. Now that word, Christ, was absolutely right. Peter doesn't see Jesus as just another prophet, or even the greatest prophet. He sees Him as the Christ, which is the Greek term for the Hebrew word Messiah, which means anointed one. The Jews knew the term well. The Messiah or "anointed one" was the descendant of David who would rule over David's kingdom and bring salvation to Israel.

At first, it's a real surprise that Jesus warns the disciples not to tell anybody this. The Greek makes it even more harsh, because the word "warn" can also mean "rebuke." This is serious business Jesus is talking about. But why doesn't He want the truth to be known? He is the Christ! But Jesus knows that if anyone outside of His inner circle hears that He is the Christ, they'll misunderstand it. It's kind of like what might happen if we went over to Europe somewhere and asked if anybody wanted to play a game of football. The word has to have the right context. And the Jews of Jesus' day didn't have the right context to understand the Messiah. They expected a warrior king to be the Messiah, one that would bring the physical nation of Israel glory and prominence over all other nations.

But Jesus explains to His disciples why they can't just go around calling Him the Christ or Messiah, not yet. It's because the real Messiah has work to do that nobody expects. He tells them that He is going to go through four things – He's going to suffer, He's going to be rejected, He's going to be killed, and He's going to be resurrected. None of these things were in the mind of a first-century Jew who was waiting for a political chieftain to rise to power. None of these things were in the mind of the disciples, either. The Hebrew Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, had passages like Psalm 22 about a suffering servant who took on the sins of the people, but nobody associated these with the Messiah. Jesus effectively tells his disciples that the Messiah has to be the suffering servant.

But there's more to it than that. Those who want to follow the Messiah and be part of His kingdom are going to have to become servants as well. Jesus puts it all on the line – His followers are going to have to deny themselves. In fact, they are going to have to put their own desires, their own expectations, their very selves, to death. Jesus uses the image of each person carrying his or her own cross. He's foreshadowing His own death, but He's also using a really harsh image all of the disciples would have understood. Crucifixion wasn't the most common form of punishment in ancient Roman territories, but it was the worst, and even if you'd never seen someone condemned to death on a cross, it was brutal enough that word spread. Jesus isn't just suggesting that his disciples might put aside their own desires...he's talking about the harshest kind of death imaginable.

And Jesus says this is the only way for us to truly gain our lives. Because what the world has to offer isn't real! Jesus says a person can gain the whole world and lose their very self. The world and Jesus are mutually exclusive – you can't have both. Either you'll be ashamed of the world and love Christ or be ashamed of Christ and love the world. Jesus says it clearly – if you're ashamed of me now, I will be ashamed of you when I return in glory. There's no compromise here. And this glory is coming soon...some will see His glory a few days later at the Transfiguration, which we'll talk about next week. Some will see His glory when He is resurrected. Others, like us, will see His glory when He returns. But He is coming in glory, and the only way to be prepared for it is to forsake the world and to cling to Him. That's what believing in the one true Messiah is all about.

For us, today, this is where things start to fall apart. We too have to decide who we say Jesus is. There are plenty of options for us, but only one makes real sense. And who we say Jesus is determines the way we live, the way we believe, and where we will stand with God when Christ returns.

Many years ago, the British author and theologian C.S. Lewis helped determine that a lot of the titles we give to Jesus simply aren't true. Lewis attacked the common thought in society that Jesus was just a good moral teacher whose real purpose was just to help us live better lives. Instead, he wrote about the three options we have for Jesus...we can call Him a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Why would we call Him a liar? Jesus' primary teachings were about Himself. He teaches about Himself in this very passage. He does it all the time. If Jesus is not the Son of God who came to forgive sins through his death and resurrection, then His moral teachings are useless. Because how can you trust someone's morals if they lie about who they are? If Jesus is not God in the flesh, then when He calls Himself "gentle" and "humble," it's simply not true. And the moral teachings of the New Testament are completely intertwined with Jesus' life; you can't separate the two. Was He simply crazy? Could be...Jesus could have been delusional. He could have been mentally ill. But again, if that were the case, then Jesus' words could not be trusted. The people of Jesus' day trusted the miracles He did as signs that He was not a liar nor a lunatic – nobody with the kind of divine power He showed could be either one. Now some people have argued, much against all the evidence we have, that the Bible is just a collection of legendary stories that added things Jesus never said or did. But if the Bible is true and Jesus said and did the things the Bible claims, then we are only left with one real option: Jesus is indeed God in the flesh, the Son of the Father, come down to offer us salvation. And that's what we have to come to grips with...Jesus being God Himself, the anointed one, the Messiah, come to rescue us.

The problem is, if we say that Jesus is the Christ, if we say He is our savior and He is our Lord, then we have to deal with the weight of those statements. Because those statements also mean a number of things to us that we don't often admit. If Jesus Christ is God, it means we no longer live for ourselves. When the Bible says we have been purchased with Jesus' blood, it means that we belong to Him. We are no longer our own to live the way we want, but we are called to lay down ourselves for Him. Now this sounds impossible, and it would be if God didn't intervene in our lives. But we are promised the Holy Spirit, and through the Holy Spirit's power, we can become holy...we can live lives that reflect the goodness and grace of the God who has ransomed us from sin and death.

But the American concept of religion in the last thirty years or so is one where God helps *us*, God is *our* friend, God is an ever-present being who serves *us* and not the other way around. God is a part of *our* life story. *We're* ultimately the only ones who matter. It's the reason why some many essential Christian beliefs have been tossed by the wayside. In a recent survey, it was found that over 75% of mainline Protestants and over 37% of evangelical Christians in America believe that many religions can lead to eternal life...not other Christian segments, not Lutherans or Catholics or Baptists or Pentecostals, but other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Now this goes against everything Christ said. Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Peter in Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Paul says the same thing in 1 Timothy 2:5 – "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." So why don't most American Christians believe what the church has taught historically and what is believed by other Christians around the world?

We don't believe it because believing it would mean something drastic. It would mean that there is right and wrong. It would mean that Jesus truly is *the only* Savior and *the only* Lord, not a teacher, not a prophet, not one good way among many. It would mean that we would have to believe the Bible is telling the truth when it talks about heaven and hell. And it would mean that we have a responsibility to tell our friends and neighbors about Christ because their eternal souls depend upon it. There is no salvation apart from Jesus. But when we begin to believe that everybody's belief is OK and that God won't punish anyone as long as they believe something, we no longer believe that Jesus is the Christ. Tracy shared with us last week how she had been convicted to tell her friends and neighbors about God because she realized that this was a very real, very sad place where those who don't believe in Christ would eventually find themselves. I'm glad she gave that testimony because we often don't like to think or hear about hell. But the truth is, when we call Jesus the Christ, we accept what He said and believe His warnings.

Now this is completely different from tolerance. Tolerance is allowing people to disagree peacefully. In Romans 12:18, Paul says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Our role is not to change our neighbors and the people God puts in our path but to share God with them. If we do that and they don't want to change their beliefs, that's between them and God. Who knows what result your caring and loving actions might have even years down the road? Tolerance for other beliefs is part of showing God's love for others. God loved us even when we were unbelievers, and we must show that same love to everyone. But that doesn't alleviate us from the responsibility of sharing Christ with those around us.

But why don't we do this? It's because, ultimately, we are selfish. We love that Jesus is our savior. We want to be saved; we want to get to heaven. It's all about *my* getting something special. And if Jesus is just my Savior, then it's all about me...*I* got a gift. Isn't it great? But the rest of our lives are spent doing what we want to do. I have to admit, I felt really convicted just writing this sermon. I mean, I am a selfish person. I know the names of more characters on TV than I do the names of my neighbors! It's easier for us to relate to people who don't even exist than to those who do because real relationship takes real effort. We think we know people on television, people who have nothing of importance to say but have a voice because they are good-looking or have lots of money or a good voice or eight children, but we don't. The people all around us are the people that matter, and the only reason we don't know about them or care about them is our own selfishness. It's something I have to fix in my own life too.

And the reason I have to fix it is because if Jesus is the Christ, He is my Savior *and* my Lord. He gets to say who we are and what we will do. Life isn't just about me and my desires anymore. My life as I knew it no longer exists. My life now depends on what Jesus wants from me, and He's made it clear what he desires for me (and you) to do. The role of the church – and by the church, I mean all those who believe in Christ – the church has one single purpose: to bring people to Christ. To introduce them to Him, to help them understand Him, to help them to faith, and to build them up to maturity. Everything else, and I mean everything else, is secondary. A building is secondary. Music – contemporary, traditional, whatever – is secondary. Fellowship is secondary. Believe it or not, feeding the poor is secondary.

Now those are all good things. In fact, we're called as Christians to do some of those things. But they are all secondary...they are all ways that we accomplish the one single purpose of the church. If we feed someone and never share the good news of Jesus Christ with them, we've missed our purpose. If we play softball with someone or go to camp with them or have them to a family breakfast and never share Christ with them, we've missed our purpose. If we sing and worship and do what churches do but never share the gospel with the people out there who are lost without God, we've missed our purpose.

Why do we so often miss our purpose? It's shame. We disregard much of the gospel's teaching about sin and death and hell because we're ashamed of it. We don't believe it's real. Or more likely, we believe that somebody is going to think we're a nut case if we do believe it. But we must believe it. We must believe the whole thing, the whole gospel, and present the whole gospel, because we cannot be ashamed of it any longer. Last week we talked about how faith is where belief and trust meet. To be saved, we've got to have faith in it all, not just the parts we like. Because the church isn't here to make us feel better about ourselves. The church isn't here to give you self-help tips or to make you understand the power of positive thinking. The church isn't here to give you your best life now. It isn't even here to give you a purpose driven life. It's here to teach you about a God-driven life. It's here so that we can fall in love with Jesus Christ and become a small part of His larger story, so we can lose ourselves in Him and find everything we ever really needed given back to us and more. It's no good if we gain the whole world and are self-actualized and self-realized and self-motivated and lose our self in the process. God wants more for us than that. God wants for us to become like Him by nailing our old selves to the cross and picking that cross up and following Him wherever He leads.

The good news, the great news, the heart of why we are here, is that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the anointed one, the one who sets us free from sin and death and hell. Jesus is the one who matters. Philippians 2:8-11 tells us, "Jesus, being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus gives us hope. We won't always get it right. Even when we commit to following Him, we are going to falter and fall and fail. We will say the wrong things and make the wrong decisions and stumble through all sorts of mistakes. But the good news is, Jesus has come so that we can be forgiven. To carry our cross, we have to drop the sins that are in our hands at His feet, and He will remember them no more.

Last week, we talked about taking leaps of faith in order to experience God's abundance. God's abundance can be found when we acknowledge Him as the Christ, as both Savior and Lord. Giving Him that name and committing to believing and acting that out may be a leap of faith for you today. If it is, make that leap. It's not just a leap for those of us who've never given our lives over to Christ. It's a leap that many of us need to make, the leap from saying that Jesus is my Savior to saying that Jesus is my Lord. It's a leap we have to make in order to stay on the narrow road with Him, a leap that leaves our old selves behind. But remember...God's abundance is there. The more you trust in Him and leave the old behind, the more you will see God providing for you. Trust Him. Walk with Him. Give Him all of yourself, so that the next time someone asks you, "Who is Jesus Christ to you," you'll know the answer. Let's pray.