

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 8.23.20

Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

“But who do you say that I am?” Matthew tells us that Jesus asked this question of Peter. Who do you say that I am? These few words are a core around which we gather our theology, our talk about God. Who do you say that I am is, I believe, the central question of faith. Matthew gospel has Jesus asking this question of Peter. In the interest of full disclosure, most scholars do not think that Jesus actually asked this specific question of Peter, nor that Peter was able to form the answer. That does not mean that it was not the central question of the disciples as they followed Jesus. It means that the question and answer are later summaries of early Christian understanding after the experience the ministry, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is what Christians had come to understand after they had lived the faith. Living faith precedes the articulation of theology.

“You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God.” responds Peter. Matthew, you may remember, is the gospel thought to be written for the Jewish followers of Jesus who were trying to integrate their Jewish faith with the Risen Lord. The doctrine of the Trinity as we know it, One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that doctrine had not yet been developed. Matthew was making a point this prophet was like no other prophet of their experience. This prophet, this teacher Jesus was not only human but divine. It was for monotheistic Jews a startling recognition. The humanity and divinity of Jesus as they worked it out eventually became the doctrine of the Trinity. But, in the beginning, what Peter and others were trying to understand was how Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of God to human beings.

In terms of our spiritual and religious life, Jesus’ question, who do you say that I am, is the question asked of us not only about Jesus but about God. Who is God? Through the centuries there have been many answers to the question. These answers have been woven together to form our theology. The answers have been set down in creeds of which we continue to recite two, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. Over the years some of the answers to the question of who is God, who is Jesus and just exactly what is this Holy Spirit have been rejected and labeled heresy. It is not easy to formulate a clear, concise and lasting answer to this central question of our faith. We each, in our heart of hearts, have an answer and each of our answers comes out of our lived experience with God. Each of our answers is a bit different, colored by the voice of God spoken to us.

The question of God’s identity has been asked since the beginning when God made God’s self-known to human beings. The question goes back to Abraham and Sarah and the promise that this old and barren couple would be the parents of many nations. God is a God of promise and a God who keeps the promises that God makes. God brought Abraham out of his tent and said; “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. “So shall your descendants be.” And Abraham believed God in spite of all evidence to the contrary. Sarah too, though she laughed at the thought of a child at her age, believed as well, and thus these two became the parents of faith and our ancestors, the rocks on which our house of faith is built to this day.

Over the centuries humankind experienced God in many ways. Sometimes we were obedient, sometimes we went far astray, but always we had the promise that God was with us. There was enslavement in Egypt, a very bad time, and yet God was there, and raised up a person of faith, Moses, to lead God's people to the land they had been promised. Life in the desert and later in the Promised Land was not always filled with milk and honey. There were difficult times, yet God was always present with them. The prophets from Elijah and beyond to all the rest, sought to bring people back to the way in which God had called them to live. It was not an easy task, it often looked like failure but God was faithful to the promise.

After many centuries, human beings beyond the Jews came to know God, and to begin to answer the central question of God's identity. Through it all, as people searched for answers God was faithful to the promise that God would never abandon God's creation. God would not abandon the land, the creatures or the human beings made in God's image.

In the region of the Fertile Crescent, there arose a powerful country, Babylon by name with a power hungry ruler who sought to control all around him. Judah and Jerusalem were defeated, burned, and the people carried away into exile. They spent many long years wondering if God would continue to be with them as promised. God seemed far away. And yet other prophets arose to give the people hope. Isaiah, of our reading this morning, known as "Second Isaiah" brought a new answer to the question of the identity of God in their midst. It was hope not only for the exiled Israelites but for all the world. Isaiah reminded all people that the promise was not just for Israel but for every nation and every age. The promise is for us.

The words of Isaiah are words for us today, as we too might struggle to articulate who God is for us. The promise and assurance of God's presence are ours to claim as we live through difficult times. God for Isaiah was a God who worked miracles. A God who ended the rule of a powerful sovereign and gave authority to another. Babylon was defeated and Persia became the new instrument of God's promise. The exiles were allowed to return home. And the word of God came to Isaiah.

Listen to me, God said to the people, listen to me. Remember my promise to Abraham and Sarah, the rocks on which I built my relationship with the whole of humanity, the stars as numerous as the heaven. Listen and I will bring you comfort and the promise will be fulfilled. Wilderness will become Eden again, the desert a garden. Joy, gladness, thanksgiving and song will be the order of the day. This is the promise. The promise to all of humanity from Abraham down to us. A beautiful promise, and one in which we can take hope and comfort today.

Who do you say that God is? The answer is as individual as each one of us. The way the promise is fulfilled for each one of us will be unique to us, depending on our needs and our fears. What is the wilderness in your life that God is waiting to turn into a new Eden? Where is the dryness of the desert that God promises will become a garden? How will God turn whatever sorrow and weeping, whatever anger and desolation is in your life to joy and gladness, to thanksgiving and song. Only you can answer that those questions.

The way in which the promise becomes reality in each life is by the grace of God. It is grace that is tailor made for each soul. As we look back over the long years to the promise made to Abraham and Sarah, we have learned many things about God. Most of what we have learned is not about who God is so much as what God does. God's actions creator, worker of miracles, life giver, promise keeper, all of these and many more reflect for us the answer to the central faith question. The reflections of God's work in the life of the world show us who God is for each one of us. And as our individual answer grows, we come to realize that the work of God in the world is our work. We are the hands and feet of the God of promise. It is through our acceptance of the gifts that God has given us, and the use of those gifts for the good of the world that we come to a deeper and deeper knowledge of who God is for us.