

Sermon Theme: "Hope Amidst Struggle"

Pent #17 (B)

Thurs. Sept. 12, 2024

Gospel: Mark 8:27-38; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12

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"Who do *they* say that I am?"

"And... who do *you* say that I am?"

These are the two questions Jesus asks his disciples as they enter the surrounding villages of Caesarea Philippi. An area with a mixed Jewish and Gentile population and known as a type of 'shopping mall for the gods'. And up to this point, Jesus has been roaming the countryside, curing the blind and the deaf, feeding the five thousand, exchanging words of conviction with a Syrophenician woman and engaging in a heated discussion with the Pharisees and scribes about traditions. And today, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection for the first time.

So why these questions to his disciples? Why now, after everything they have witnessed - healing, helping, loving, learning, and soon, soon...suffering.

Perhaps I get the first question Jesus asks, "Who do *they* say that I am?" What's the gossip going around town about who this man is? The disciples are quick to respond, "Some say, John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others say one of the prophets." Ironically, Jesus provides no response but comes out with another question, and this time, this time, it's personal. "But who do *you*... say that I am?" And Peter's immediate response is, "You are the Messiah!" Peter's response here reminds me of the game show, Family Feud, "Good answer, good answer Peter!" whether it's correct or not. I visualize the other disciples patting Peter on the back at this point.

And guess what? Peter gets it right. He answers Jesus' question correctly. However, I'm not so sure, and I don't think Jesus is either, that Peter's identification of Jesus as the Messiah is fully understood. Peter's interpretation, you see, of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, the long-awaited one by the Jews, did not include dying on a cross. So Jesus begins to teach them what it means that the Son of Man, the Messiah, will undergo great suffering; he will be

rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and he will be killed...and after three days rise again.

Can you imagine the reversal Peter was experiencing that day? A suffering servant instead of a powerful Messiah to meet the needs of injustice, oppression and poverty. A suffering servant who cares deeply for the sick, the lonely, the dejected. A suffering servant, who takes up his cross for the sake of others. Whose followers will also be called to take up their cross and follow the divine interpretation of the Messiah, and for Mark's community, and for Peter and the other disciples, this first passion prediction may mean persecution and a long, long road ahead.

And I surmise, that Peter's stern disapproval of Jesus' "right out in the open" teaching about his (Jesus') death...especially his death on a Roman cross may have created fear in Peter and it was consuming him. You know, those times when a diagnosis comes with devastating outcomes; when a marriage ends that you knew would last a lifetime; when children are killed daily as the result of war; or when injustice spills over into our streets and people are treated as less than who they were created to be. The seemingly straightforward question that Jesus that Jesus is asking and his no-nonsense response certainly isn't what Peter had in mind.

"Peter, who do *you* say that I am?" Who do *we* say that Jesus is and what implications could our response illicit when the teaching of Jesus, the Messiah, is...a suffering servant? What does that look like for us today, in the 21st century?

The writer in our reading from second Isaiah today suggests that whatever struggles or suffering we experience from speaking up for those who are marginalized, or any personal struggles we may encounter...God stands besides us. *The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.* The writer here is suggesting that God continually, morning by morning, is the one who... even when our suffering for the sake of mercy and justice drains us, or relationships are strained and hurtful words are slung our way,

or words of vile rhetoric are constant across every screen, and it's hard not to respond in a loving way...it is God who vindicates, who liberates and unburdens us. It is the suffering love that sustains us in those times of ridicule and heartache.

And believe me, it is hard to live according to the suffering love of Christ at times. The writer of James says, it's not easy to live outside of bitter envy and selfish ambition and disorder. And when our response comes out of the need to react and defend, it is difficult to tame the tongue. Oooh...our words matter. Our responses to those who have hurt us or hate us or vice versa, can be volatile and very destructive to relationships. Words do matter.

James' practical advice today, for us as individuals and as a faith community, reminds us that if we use the gift of speech to bless others, bolster the weary and not to harm others ...we are living into the wisdom of a suffering servant.

But...James follows that advice with this, "No one can tame the tongue." Then the writer takes it one step further reiterating what happens when we spew hateful, harmful and heartless words toward one another. The tongue, you see, has the power to inflame a community - a small fire can become a forest fire in no time. The tongue - this small body part has the power to love and to hate; to build others up and to tear them down. The tongue, much like the small rudder of a ship, has the power to navigate the ship even in the midst of a huge storm; or like the bit into the mouth of horses - which not only controls the horse but guides their whole body. Words matter.

But as I said a minute ago, following Jesus is not easy. Living the life of a suffering servant, turning the other cheek to show solidarity with the God of love and restoration, is not easy. We will miss the mark at times. But good news, the God who loves us, is also the One who vindicates us - who frees us. Yes, Peter got the answer right when Jesus' asked him, "Who do YOU, Peter, say that I am?" And I think this question is as relevant today, as it was when Jesus first asked Peter the question. So... "Who do YOU, Paula, say that I am?" "Who do YOU, First Lutheran, say that I am?" Amen.