



Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost, Aug 27, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Exodus 1:8-2:10](#)

[Psalm 124](#)

[Romans 12:1-8](#)

[Matthew 16:13-20](#)

Our help is in the Name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. Amen.

Good morning, you who are dearly loved by God.

We begin today with a question:

Who do you say that I am?

Some days, that is a question I even ask myself, in the morning as I stand in front of the mirror. Who is this David?

Maybe there are days you ask it of yourself. Who is this Mary? Who is this AI? Who is this Kay? We may ask ourselves, Who do you say that I am?

It is a question we might want to ask of others who are close to us. Because, we often do not feel known for who we truly are. And because, we often do not know how we are being perceived, what ideas people are forming about us. We would like some clarity. And we would like to know if we are known.

Who do you say that I am?

Over this past year, we have had passages from the Gospels and other scriptures of the New and Old Testament, every week in our Friday e-news and every month in our monthly newsletter, inviting us to get to know Jesus more clearly. These scriptures were put together as part of the collection for our whole diocese, titled "Who Is This Jesus?"

Those of us who have had a hand in guidance and leadership for our diocese compiled these scriptures in response to two things. First, around us we have seen the rising tide of what some call "Christian Nationalism," which was holding an image of Jesus as a kind of warrior god. And second, we in our diocese have a deep desire to grow, strengthen, and start congregations, and in order to do that with deep spiritual integrity we need to know and love this Jesus whom we claim to know and follow.

So, a question for each of us today, that we hear directly from the mouth of Jesus himself, to his followers:

Who do you say that I am?

Friends, who do you say that Jesus is?

Now, Jesus asks that question after he asks another opening question. He asks his followers, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” He asks this not because he wants to know – he already has insights about what people are saying about him and about the promised and hoped-for Messiah – but it is also true that a public figure often does not hear directly how people think about him or her, so it can be helpful to ask others what they are hearing in different places. But Jesus asks this as a way to get his followers to name the kinds of things that they hear in public conversations, the ideas that are circulating around in the culture, the perspectives shaping mindsets of people all around them that might also be shaping their own ideas and perspectives. These days, it’s kind of like asking, “Who do people say that I am on social media and the mass media – on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and TikTok? What are they saying I’m all about, in the bars and coffeehouses, in their work and in the parks?”

His followers respond with what they’ve heard. “Well, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or another one of the prophets.” Some say the Son of Man is John the Baptist come back with new power, or Elijah who called down fire from heaven, or Jeremiah who was there to declare the wreckage of Israel.

Today, I wonder what we would say. How would we answer this question? What do we hear around us about the Son of Man, the Son of God, the hoped-for Messiah? What are people expecting Jesus to be?

Some are saying, Jesus at his second coming will be like Mars or Ares, the Roman or Greek gods of war – or like Thor the strong-armed Norse god of thunder wielding a hammer. Some – not a few, maybe more like many – are hoping for a Jesus who will bring fire and wreckage in the name of a righteousness that they are certain they represent. There are people who are dressing Jesus up as a White American Christian Nationalist, and America as God’s new chosen nation. This is dangerous and outright blasphemous. More than that, this is not really Jesus.

Now, we all are capable of distorting Jesus, just as we are capable of distorting any leader, any celebrity, any public figure, any family member.

So Jesus turns to the heart of the matter with his next question. “But who do you say that I am?” Who am I to you? Not to other people. Who am I to you? Beyond what anyone else says or what culture around you is saying, do you really know me, are you willing to really know me for who I truly am?

Every land, every people, has its distortion. We are no different.

And in every land, in every culture, it is possible for a people to forget the God that has touched and shaped their lives and the people that have contributed to all that they know and assume is their own right.

Today, our journey through the ancient Hebrew scriptures leads us to years long after Joseph, and the arising of a new age in Egypt where its leader and peoples forgot who had saved them and the world around them from disaster. Or, maybe they remembered and heard the stories of Joseph, but there

was no personal relationship – as the book of Exodus begins, “A pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph.”

Not knowing someone sets us up for easily taking on the gossip and presumptions and fantasies and prejudices of the world around us, about that person and the people that person represents. Without relationship, we fill the gap with all sorts of assumptions. And we call those assumptions “the truth.”

So the pharaoh who did not know Joseph looked over his lands and saw a foreign people who seemed to be prospering and growing in population. And he schemed ways to deal with those people whom he regarded as “not my people.” The scheming led down pathways of taking back pasture lands that an earlier pharaoh had given Jacob’s family when Joseph had brought them to Egypt during the great famine. It led further to taking the Israelites into enforced labor, pressing them into service as slaves to build entire cities. And, when they continued to grow in population, he and other Egyptians turned to viewing them as a growing nuisance and threat. The door opened to killing of their male babies as a form of population control. The women of this time were heroic, finding ways to break the unjust and wicked rules that sought to kill their children, and finding paths of kindness to secure places for their own offspring even among those who, in principle, hated them or looked down on them or tolerated their own rulers’ schemes against them.

Does this sound strange? Such history has repeated itself across the world. Genocides in Rwanda and the Balkan states. Erosion of protection and increase in oppression of people in the Uighur Province of China, as the government paves the way for ever-increasing dominance of Han Chinese people. The treatment of Jews in Germany and Russia in this last century. And our own history in this country, with seizure of lands of people who were here long before, and enslavement of people seized from their lands and brought to this continent, and the history of red-lining and sunset towns that ruled out any presence of people of different races – this history is a repetition of our humanity at its worst. It should come as no surprise that the stories of Exodus, of God’s rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, were among the most treasured scriptures among enslaved Black people in this country.

This is not a closed history. Just this last week, when I was at a conference of leaders from across Christian traditions in this country, among people doing extraordinary work with pastors and priests, I ran into a pastor-couple from Spokane. They lead a healthy Presbyterian congregation that is racially and culturally diverse. Only five years ago, their Latino youth pastor led a racially diverse group of youth over to Coeur d’Alene to work with some agencies addressing poverty and homelessness. At the end of their time here, they stopped at a fast food restaurant to have ice cream. There, in the parking lot, a North Idaho man started shouting at the Latino youth pastor and the youth to “go back where you came from, you [bleeping] half-breeds,” and physically attacked the youth pastor. The attacker was pulled off the youth worker... and then, was not arrested until five days later... and then, was only charged with a misdemeanor. The pastor-couple has ever since told their congregation not to come to Coeur d’Alene, because it is not safe.

I am sad to share this news with you. I remember being horrified when this racially motivated attack first happened, and I remember being disturbed by the weak charge brought against the attacker. But now I have heard the enduring effects of that moment on this community, told to me in a city over halfway across the country by a colleague in ministry. Coeur d’Alene has gained a reputation, with direct effects on communities of people not far away from us.

Not knowing a people, and not seeking to get to know a people, opens the gateway for the void being filled with presumptions, fantasies, and prejudices. Withdrawing entirely from a people further opens the gateways for distortions to take root.

When couples stop talking to each other, their relationship begins to unravel. They become increasingly attached to the ideas they have built up about each other, and respond to each other out of those ideas and presumptions. They have begun to lose each other.

The same is true for different groups of people.

Who do you say that I am? Setting aside all that you have heard others say, who do YOU say that I am? How do you know me as I truly am?

Can we enter our relationships with one another, and with other people who are not like ourselves, seeking to learn and know enough in order to answer this question? Can we set aside the assumptions and scripts and prejudices that we have heard and inherited, in order to see and hear another person – and another people – clearly?

As we heard in the letter to followers of Jesus in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Let us begin with this Jesus. This Jewish man from a smaller backwater town, this young man from among a conquered people who were under the iron hand of Roman occupiers who saw them as lesser beings and Jewish opportunists who cared more for themselves than their people. This man on whom a whole lot of people were beginning to stake their fantasies and hopes.

Can we come to know Jesus more fully? Do we want to know this Jesus, really?

It is best for us to let Jesus be Jesus, and to get to know Jesus as he is.

It is best for us to let each person – and each group of people – be who they are, and to get to know them as they are – and to let them know us as we are.

When we do this – when we open space to truly know others and to seek to know people as they truly are, we open the gates of the kingdom of heaven. We bind the patterns of untruth, and we loose the power of knowing one another as the image of God that each of us is. We discover and dare to name the gifts that each person and each group of people brings.

This is no small thing. The kingdom of heaven’s gate break open when we come to know one another, truly – and when we come to know the one who is God-with-us, Emmanuel, this Jesus, truly – and when we dare to ask this Jesus, and others around us, that same question that lays us bare before the world—

Who do you say that I am?