

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
Isaiah 51: 1-6; Matthew 16: 13-20
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by Pat Berger

Who do you say that I am, Jesus asked his disciples in our reading today from Matthew, and he asks us still today. "Who do you say that I am?" It wasn't so difficult when he first asked, "Who do people say that I am?" Oh, they responded. Well, some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say Jeremiah or another of the prophets. But then Jesus got down to business: who do you say that I am?

For once, Peter (whose name was still Simon at that moment) seems to have been with the program, as we might say. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus said, "Yes!" (He must have said it that way, don't you think?!) And then he blessed Simon, and named him Peter (which was not even a name at that time; it was a word that meant rock), and said that he, Simon Peter, was The Rock, on whom Jesus would build the church. He promised Peter the keys of the kingdom, told him that whatever he bound would be bound, whatever he loosed would be loosed. What all of that meant was that the authority of God's Kingdom that had been given to Jesus was being passed through Jesus to the disciples. And THEN -- after all of this spectacular proclaiming -- Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. I wonder how well that one worked out. . .

We don't live under the same admonition not to tell anyone who Jesus is, but the question remains the same: who do we say, who do our lives say, that Jesus is? One of the commentators wrote that that is the question for this week. And she added a few questions to help us with it: "What will you stand up for? What is important? When do you say what you need to, want to, have to? When are you silent?"

The prophet in our reading from Isaiah is talking to those of God's people who are trying, the ones asking the right questions. They are the ones, in verse 1, who "pursue righteousness" and who "seek the

Lord". Both of these words imply acts that are being done and goals that have not yet been reached. And: that is what faithful people do. They know they have not yet arrived and that they must keep pursuing and seeking. Their faithful trying is their success.

These people in the Exodus reading are in exile. The prophet's purpose, one commentator wrote, was to, "encourage those who are faithfully trying to be faithful to look ahead to God's promised deliverance. They are in exile, AND God is going to take them home. . . . he tells them to look forward by looking back." For us, today, Jesus, in Matthew, is naming Simon "the Rock;" God in Exodus is telling the people to look back at the "rock from which they were hewn."

In both readings, we are faced with people who, indeed, need to look forward by looking back. Is this a good time for them to lead in ways that might put them on the wrong side of the powers that be? Or is this a time that it would be better to play it safe? In Matthew, in the very next verse which is part of next week's reading, Jesus begins to tell the disciples that he needs to go to Jerusalem, and suffer at the hands of the powers, and be killed, and be raised. His listeners knew that important people weren't happy with what Jesus was saying and doing; their lives were as likely to be in danger as was Jesus' life. Clearly, though, somehow, on that day, it was time for Peter to stand up, time not to be silent, time to declare: You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

And what about us? Who do we say that Jesus is? And what does our answer mean for our lives and in our lives, and for the lives of others? These are not easy questions to answer even now. God does not give us easy answers; Jesus did not give easy answers; sometimes we may not be able to faithfully give easy answers. In order to be who we say that we are, to be who we really want to be, we also may need to step up, to step out. Even a glance at a news show today will show us situations where various of God's beloved children are hurting, or hungry, or ill, or fighting, or -- we could go on. Who can Jesus be in our lives and through our lives that we can be a small piece of alleviating these difficulties? For one thing, we bring a fair amount

of change each quarter so that our Change for Change might, indeed, bring change. The amount of peanut butter that we bring goes a long way for some hungry children in this area. On a larger scale, soon we will be receiving information on how our gifts to the Peace and Global Witness Offering will change lives everywhere they go. Some of us have opportunities to participate in conversations that break down walls. Those conversations may begin in this community, or in our neighborhoods, or in our own homes. Answer Jesus' question for yourself -- "Who do you say that I am?" -- and listen for what the answer, or answers, demand from you.

Let us pray.