

Lent 3 - Wandering Heart: "Praise the Mount"
Matthew 16:13-20
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St. Helens, Oregon on March 3, 2024
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This morning's drive coming over the mount, Cornelius Pass, I was behind drivers that had 2 speeds. One speed was slow, the other was slower. The speed sign for curves was taken literally and the cars travelled well under the 45 mph, 35 mph or 25 mph signs. Here, I thought the signs for corners were just suggestions on how fast it was recommended to go through them. They were cautious. Had you been with me, you'd have heard me talking to my windshield. Yes, I do that to help others drive better.

I am sure you have your techniques for driving or coping as you drive. None of these driving techniques are central to our faith journey. Here is what is central.

"Who do you say that I am?" This is the central question found in our Bible. This is a basic question that I believe all followers of Jesus must answer – and not just once, but at various times in our life: Who do *we* say that Jesus is? For us, and for our world?

When you think about it, every person on this planet believes something about God. But it can vary a great deal. Even we Christians can believe different things about the one God whom we all worship. Not only that, but our understanding of God – our theology – can change over our lifetime. In fact, it should change, as we grow in our faith. Like Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:11-12, "When I was a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I put childish ways behind me." The reason why this question is so very important, I think, is because how we answer this question directly affects how we live out our faith, and how we live out our lives.

Praise the mount!

Here is how it matters, **if** you believe that God is like a divine scorekeeper, keeping track of all of your good deeds and all of your sins, then you will probably live your lives very carefully, won't you? And rather fearfully – trying to do good deeds when you can, and trying to avoid sins, and hoping that you come out ahead at the end. **If**, on the other hand, you believe that God is all-accepting and welcoming, yet rather distant and waiting patiently in Heaven for you to get there, you may not really worry about your good deeds and your sins, and whether you are pleasing God with your life.

It goes even deeper than that. Because what we believe about God affects all sorts of other things, like how we pray. If we believe that God is distant, and simply watching events unfold in our world with little participation or influence, then we won't spend a lot of time asking God to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I once met a person who described themselves as a Jewish atheist, who believed that it was "against the rules" for God to intervene in our world.

What we believe about God matters. If we think of God as a stern judge, we might also avoid prayer, but for a different reason – because we won't dare to ask God for favors. Then again, if we think of God as a loving parent, we will turn to God when we need help or advice. If we think of God as a friend, we will spend time in conversation with God just talking about our day.

How we pray, in other words, depends very much on what we believe about God. But what we believe about God affects not only our prayer-life.

It also affects how we face trials in our life. What we believe about God affects how we approach every aspect of our life, including how we make our way through tumultuous times.

Praise the mount!

What we believe about God matters, more than anything else in life. And that's probably why Jesus initiated the conversation in today's gospel reading. Because Jesus knew that what the disciples thought of him would affect how they would live their lives going forward. Their theology – their understanding of God – mattered. It mattered then. And it matters now. So Jesus sat the disciples down and had a theological conversation with them.

He first asked them a fairly easy question, "*Who do people say that I am?*" Well, some say John the Baptist, they answered, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It's a pretty easy question, because they are just sharing what they hear, rather than what they believe. This wouldn't be a difficult question for any of us to answer. Or anyone else, for that matter. But then Jesus asked his disciples the harder question, the more important question: "*Who do you say that I am?*" Now, we might think of this as an easy question, too.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We all know that. We know the answer to this question. We've been to Sunday School. We know this stuff. We've heard it many times before. But Jesus wants more, I believe, than the pat Sunday School answer. Jesus wants us to answer this question with our head, and with our heart, too, and with our soul and with our life.

Who do you say that Jesus is? If Jesus himself were to ask you that question, how would you answer it? And is your life reflecting that answer? What do you believe about God, really? What do you believe about Jesus? The answer will set the course of your life. It matters, more than anything else in this world.

Yet, there is one more piece of this question that I think is very important to think about today. And it is one of the reasons why I am a pastor rather than a psychologist. Because to me, just as important as *what* our answer to Jesus' question is, is *when* and *where* we ask it and answer it.

What do I mean? I mean that this question demands an answer not just in a classroom. But in a hospital room. Not just in our homes. But in funeral homes. Not just on Sunday morning. But during those nights when we struggle to sleep. This question demands an answer not just when life is going well. But when life is falling apart. That is when theology's rubber hits the road, so to speak. That's when it really matters. That's when what we truly believe about God matters.

That's when our faith is tested. And when the answer is not just words. But when it is life. Theology is more important there and then, than it is in any classroom.

This time in the life of Plymouth Presbyterian Church is clearly a time for all of us to think about this question again. And answer it with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It's a time for us to struggle again with who we believe God is, and who we believe Jesus is. It is a time to wrestle with what we believe God is doing in our world today, and with what we are being called to do in our world today as followers of Jesus.

One last piece of this whole question that is vitally important. Go back to Peter's answer to Jesus' question again. After Peter answered that question, Jesus blessed him and told him that he would build his church on Peter, on the rock, and that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

This is the very first time that Jesus uses the word "church" in the gospels. I think that is significant. Don't you? Peter's answer becomes the foundation of the church. Jesus promises to build his church on the rock foundation of Peter's faith. Jesus connects Peter's answer, about who he believes Jesus is, to his promise to build his church. And that connection is significant. I think Jesus is trying to remind us here that we will never get our theology right outside of the church community.

We need the community of faith that Jesus founded. Among other things, it is why we have a Bible. But more generally, Jesus knows that we won't be able to confess our faith in him, correctly and consistently, if we are not active in a church. Believing all of this is simply too difficult to do alone, especially when the storms hit. We need each other. We need our fellow believers. And Jesus knows it. Which is why he spends so much of his ministry building community. And why he founded the church.

The church may not be perfect. No congregation is. But it is Jesus' plan for the world. He began the church, to share the gospel with all the world. And to bring healing and hope and peace and justice and love, in his name, to the ends of the earth. And he promises that as we do this, nothing will prevail against his church. The gates of Hades will not prevail against his church. Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus, and nothing will prevail against the church that Jesus founded. That is a theology that offers us a sure foundation. One that we can build a life of hope and meaning upon. One that can survive the storms and trials that this life inevitably throws at us.

What we believe about God matters. More than anything else in this world. Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it! And there is no more important time to wrestle with this than right now. In the midst of all that we are going through in our world today, we confess once again our faith and trust in Jesus, believing, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, that he is the Savior of our world, the son of the living God. Who promises to calm our every storm, who offers us a peace that surpasses understanding, who is eager to hear our every prayer, and who assures us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Jesus asked the disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?” Church, what do you say?

**Jesus is a hand reaching out in the storm,
the voice of truth spoken over us,
and love without walls.**

**Jesus is justice for the weary,
healing for the hurt,
and welcome for the stranger.**

**Jesus is teacher, Messiah, and friend—
with me on the mountain
and beside me in the valley.**

**Jesus is a star in the night,
and the love that knows my name.**

Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?”

Like Peter, we say,

“Jesus, you are the Messiah, son of the Living God.”