

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Zechariah 12:7-10, Luke 9:18-27 (ESV)

April 3, 2005

“Who do you say that I am?” Here is where the gospel gets personal. “Who do you say that I am?” There are other questions. “Who do the crowds say that I am?” Who do the history books say that I am? Who do the powers that be say that I am? Who do the trend setters say that I am? Who do the professors say that I am? These may be interesting. They may be important. But this is personal: “Who do you say that I am?” And Luke has recorded it not only for its historical value, which is significant, but also and especially for its gospel value for you and me. “Who do you say that I am?” We have read enough and have heard enough that we have reached a point calling for self-declaration. “Who do you say that I am?” Indeed, Jesus himself looks out from the pages of the gospel right into your eyes and mine, and Jesus himself looks down from heaven right into your heart and mine and asks us today, “Who do you say that I am?” The question cannot be avoided.

Luke, of course, provides an answer for Theophilus, for whom he wrote this gospel, and so for us, to whom this gospel has now come. Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” That is who Peter says Jesus is. That is who Luke says Jesus is. The question for each of us is, “Who do you say that I am?” We have to answer that for ourselves. Can we be helped by those who have gone before us?

Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” What does that mean? It means “The Anointed One.” In ancient Israel, kings were anointed to their office. After Israel was defeated and the monarchy was ended, the people expected God to send someone else to save them, a new king, a better king, a stronger king. They called this anticipated redeemer the Anointed One. So, for Peter to call Jesus the Christ was for him to recognize that Jesus fulfilled this ancient prophecy of the word of God. Peter believed that Jesus was the one sent from God and by God to save his people. Can we confess this faith as our own?

Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” For him to say this was also for him to realize that God did not choose just anyone to be the Christ. Jesus was not merely one more human being, one more prophet, one more priest, or even one more king. Neither was Jesus an angel or a messenger from God. Instead, God sent his only son. God sent the only one who shares his godliness. In Jesus, God himself is with us. Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” Can we confess this faith as our own?

It is not insignificant that in response to this answer Jesus immediately defined himself. And he did so using four verbs. “And he strictly charged and

commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’” With this hard lesson, we have come to the heart of the gospel. It is not pretty, it is not easy, it is not soft, and it is not gentle. But it is the truth. Here, for the first time, Jesus tells us that he will suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised again, all on our account. This is for us.

Jesus suffered because all of humanity is opposed to God. We could not tolerate God living among us. He came anyway. Our contempt could not keep him away. But he paid a terrible price for coming here. He took the initiative to enter into relationship with us when we would not and could not take the initiative to enter into relationship with him. He came to us because we do not and cannot go to him. He came as the embodiment and expression of grace. And his willingness to come despite the suffering, his intention to overcome the opposition by suffering, is good news for us. For he suffered willingly and without complaint in order to defeat the powers of evil which inflict suffering. If he had struck back, evil would have won. Only by patient, long suffering could he and did win the victory for us. He suffered for us, not so that we would never suffer, but in order to defeat suffering and evil, so that we might live in glory with God.

Jesus was rejected also because of our stubborn opposition to God. The elders, chief priests, and scribes represented the highest religious aspirations of the human race. Yet they could not see, accept, or understand that Jesus was God among us. Part of the reality of what was going on is that Jesus was not simply *a* way to God, but instead he was and is *the* way to God. The significance of his uniqueness is that we have rejected the very one who came to us despite our rejection of him. He willingly suffered rejection by humanity in order that we might be accepted by God.

In the same way, Jesus was killed. Betrayed by one of his disciples, deserted by the rest, falsely accused by the Jewish authorities, and wrongly convicted by the Roman Empire, he was killed not simply by their actions but in fulfillment of God’s plan for our salvation. He took on the sin of the world and paid the price for it in order that we might be forgiven and *not* spend eternity in hell. He died that day in order that we might live forever. Thanks be to God!

So, Jesus did not win a cheap and easy victory for us. He won a hard and painful victory, suffering abandonment by his disciples, accusation by the religious leaders of his day, condemnation by the legal powers of the Roman Empire, and death by crucifixion. Our forgiveness comes through Christ accepting our condemnation. Our victory comes through his defeat. Our comfort comes through his suffering. Our blessing comes through his being cursed. Our very life comes through his death.

And, of course, as we celebrate at Easter, Jesus was raised from the dead. He was brought back to life, forever beyond the power of death. God vindicated his suffering, rejection, and death. The resurrection does not come without the suffering, rejection, and death. But those do not have the final word. After they had done their worst and spent themselves, God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the fourth and final verb with which Jesus defined himself.

Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” We have heard at least part of what this means. It is worth asking what that does not mean. It does not mean whatever we want it to mean. It does not mean that we are the ones who get to define the term. It is significant that Jesus began this first hard teaching of his good news only after the first profession of faith that he was the Christ. At least one consequence of this profession is that when you acknowledge someone as “the Christ,” you have to yield to *that* person the right to define what is meant by “the Christ.” And that is the prerogative which Jesus claimed when “he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one,” not until he could lead them to deeper understanding, insight, and faith.

Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” Can that be our answer, too? What are the implications for those who would follow Jesus, believe in him, and bear his name? “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” This runs against everything else we think we know. This runs against every instinct for self-preservation. This runs against every encouragement of the world for us to seek self-fulfillment. But what Jesus is telling us is that every instinct for self-protection leads to death, while true life is found and saved only by following him to the cross, only by dying to self, only by living not for ourselves but for him alone. Life is not and cannot be fulfilled in selfish self-fulfillment; life is fulfilled only in selfless self-emptying and self-denial all in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. That may sound backward to us, but that is the way it is. Nobody asked whether we liked it, but this is reality. If we profess Jesus as Lord, we have to abandon all claims to being our own lords. We cannot have it both ways. The Christian faith is not about human potential. It is about the grace of God.

It is interesting, since Jesus defined his own role with four verbs, that he also used four verbs in defining his followers: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” The Christian life begins with going after Jesus, who is known in and through his word and gospel. It continues with self-denial, the setting aside of all self-centeredness and all self-serving in order to become God-centered and God-serving. It matures with taking up one’s cross daily, willingly dying to self and living to Christ. And all of this

culminates in following Jesus. Our very lives are not ours to keep, but to give. To keep one's life to one's self is to forfeit life. But to pour out one's life for God and for others is to find true life. Christ has not taken a journey for us so that we do not have to journey. He has gone before us to show us the way. He calls us to follow the path that he has traveled, so we can be with him. Jesus Christ gave away his life in order that we might live.

We realize from everyday experience that individual human life is designed and meant to be part of something larger than itself. We are gathered into families, communities, and nations. We share languages, histories, and cultures. We cooperate in companies and economies. Human life best expresses itself by placing the energies of the self at the service of things larger than the self. This is why loyalties to schools and teams are so strong. It is part of the reason patriotism is so powerful. Yet none of these human realities exhausts the need of the self to be part of something more. Why? Because God designed us to be in fellowship with him, and nothing less will satisfy us. We are meant to be here, in church, singing our songs of praise to God, joining our voices with those of the angels and of the saints who have gone before us, for they already worship God eternally. How do we hear and join the distant song of angels? By dying to the urge to sing our own praises and learning to sing God's praises instead.

Jesus did not win a cheap and easy victory for us. And there is no cheap and easy discipleship. Christ leads the way. Christ sets the example. Christ promises to be with us. He will never ask us to do or to suffer anything that he has not done or suffered. Are we ready to deny ourselves? Are we willing to take up our cross, the means of our execution, the death of the self? Are we able to follow Jesus through the day and through the night, across all the years of our lives? Are we willing to give our best and our all to the service of Christ?

All of human life is lived by some faith. We may believe in ourselves. We may believe in our country. We may believe in the economy. We may believe in the structures and patterns of the natural world. The question is whether we can believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God who made the world as an arena within which for us to love God and one another, the living God who is revealed through Jesus his Son. And this faith begins with our answer to the question Jesus asks each of us today, "Who do you say that I am?"

We have an advantage in this regard over Peter and the first disciples. We can learn from their hard lessons. We can learn from their mistakes. Moreover, we live after the crucifixion and resurrection. We know that Jesus was the Christ by being the suffering servant, and that he was the suffering servant because he was the Christ. Nevertheless, knowing it is different from believing it, professing it, and

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actually living it. So it is that Jesus still asks the faith question of us today, calling for our answer, waiting for our response: “Who do you say that I am?”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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