

## Who Do You Say That I Am?

Mark 8:27- 30, 34-38

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*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*.... He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."*

As a pastor for over 35 years, I am interested in people's spirituality and faith journeys. I am interested in attitudes toward faith, church, religious practices people experienced growing up. And I am interested in people's current questions about God, the Holy, the Bible, Jesus, miracles, prayer. I don't claim to have the answers, but I believe there are ways our spiritual lives deepen when we explore, when we talk, when we wonder out loud.

When people say to me, I don't really believe in God, I usually say, Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Chances are I don't believe in that God either.

One of the books that helped me and challenged me to think about who God is was a little book I read in high school during confirmation. It is a book that challenged and changed the way an entire generation thought about God. The book was written by an Anglican priest in England named J.B. Phillips. The title of the book he wrote was *Your God Is Too Small*. First published in 1952.

I was surprised at how relevant much of what he had to say after 70 years. The first half of Phillips' book is about understandings and images of God that are just too small. Here are a few

- God: the resident policeman. Some of us seem to know God primarily as the source of scolding and guilt. This God is too small.
- God: the parental hangover. God is our parents magnified. This God is a hangover from what our parents were to us. This God is too small.
- God: the old man with a long white beard who has lived for ever. Phillips wrote about a group of students being asked about a new thing that had just been developed when the book was written - radar. He asked a group of students if they thought that God

understood radar. The students said, “No! God is too old to understand radar.” This God is too small.

- God: the heavenly bosom. God: the one to whom we go for comfort and escape when life becomes too hard. This God is too small.
- God in a box, whom we turn to when we need answers and we don’t know where else to go for answers. This God exists only to answer questions for which we have no other explanation: God in a box. This God is too small.
- God: the managing director, whose job it is to coordinate and steer the universe. Even this God is too small.

All of those were images of God that I carried around inside of my mind and my heart. As a young adult. J.B. Phillips helped me begin to understand that the God who created the universe, who was, and is, and ever will be, is larger and closer than the ways I imagined or thought about God, Divine Mystery, Source of Love.

How would we answer the questions Jesus asked his followers in today’s passage? These questions shows up in Matthew, Luke and Mark – 3 of the gospels.

Who do people say that I am?

In Marin, in the Bay Area, in 2024, in our interfaith setting and our church....

You are .... the Higher Power

You are Jesus, teacher, Rabbi

You are Spirit in us and all people and all creation

You are the Cosmic Christ

You are Source of Shalom

You are Mystery

You are energy, you are a web of connection, you are

What else?

When we take time to put into words how we answer question – Who do you say that I am? – it is connected to other questions.

A friend’s sister was telling me about a job interview she had recently, during which she was asked the question, “What would people who know you say that they do not like about you?” The question so threw her in the moment she was wondering about what she had answered. And it made me wonder if I could answer it about myself. (Root)

What do people who know me not like about me? What do they like about me?

Who would they say that I am? And is that who I truly am? What summarizes a person?

Jesus asks a question and throws his friends for a loop. He starts by inviting them to describe stories, report rumors, recap the buzz. Who do people say that I am? A fun game, ok! Some say this, others that, you know. But then he asks them what must feel like a frighteningly vulnerable thing- both to ask and to be asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Imagine asking that of your spouse, your partner, your close friend, your sibling, your child. Who would you say I am? Not even - How would you describe me? What are my defining characteristics, my strengths and weaknesses? But, in your words, who am I?

Perhaps the deepest and most difficult question most of us spend a lifetime with, is, Who am I? And just when we think we have a grasp on it, we keep changing, slippery old us! and we have to keep wrestling with it anew.

Who am I, now that my beloved has died? Who am I, now that I have this diagnosis?  
Who am I with this person to love? This job that inspires me?  
Who am I with this newfound freedom? Who am I, as a retired person?  
Who am I now that I finished that degree, that project, that role... ?  
Who am I when I've done something so horribly outside what I thought I was capable of?  
When I can't take back those words, when I can't repair that breach?  
Who am I when I thought I was has changed?

Who am I? can a scary question, and not one we invite others to contemplate with us.

But Jesus opens up his chest and asks them to peer inside. Who am I, would you say?

And right away, Peter, who has been waiting for this chance, who has been mulling this question for many sleepless nights, who has given up a perfectly stable career to follow this guy around because the question has so intrigued and compelled him and now he's finally ready to issue his conclusion, and is thrilled at being asked, answers, "Why Jesus?! You are the Messiah!"

It feels great to say it! To say it out loud because it summarizes everything Peter has longed for and all that he hasn't put words to until now. God is saving us! Before my eyes every day I see the promise made real – in his words, in his healing, this is it! He is it! We are being delivered from all that is broken, the fulfillment is here and I am ready to declare it!

So his face beaming in confidence and trust, he delivers his pronouncement. Most likely he is expecting a hug. Or high five or some kind of praise for his astute observations.

But Jesus starts talking about suffering, death. Peter is rattled. Jesus says...

What you say is true. I am the Messiah. But I do not think it means what you think it means. Messiah means I'll suffer because I speak the truth to power. It means I'll die. It means it's going to be hard on me and on those who follow me.

I am not your hero, after all. Not the fulfillment of all your wishes and dreams, who ends your distress and solves all problems and make everything better. I am not the one who saves you out of this. I am the one who joins you in this. I will show you ways to the Mystery, to love your neighbor, to love all creation and love yourself.

Jesus looks at his beloved disciples, and at the crowds of people gathered around and he wants them to know, this mystery of incarnation, fully human and fully Divine, is deep and wide and lives and breathes and weeps and rejoices with us. Every single loss and tragedy, every person who goes to bed hungry, angry or painfully alone, this one is there, holding it with us, joining us in it.

So in this Christ mystery the whole world has its belonging. And so to follow means opening up your heart as well, to all the world, and to every beloved, befuddled mystery of a person made in the image of God. Following is losing your ego and loving your neighbor.

If we are going to be the kind of people who follow Jesus, it's good to consider just what that means. He speaks of "losing yourself." Did you ever lose yourself? I'm not asking if you ever got lost – that's a different question. But losing yourself.

A friend told a story about a woman in his congregations. "A lady I know who has plenty of resources, who has every reason to coast on her good reputation, has been slipping into the city when nobody is looking. She doesn't tell her friends at the country club what she's doing. But I'll tell you: she is teaching at-risk teenagers how to read.

"She sits with them, learns their names, learns their stories, listens to how they have no home of their own to return to, so they sleep on the couches of their friends. And she is teaching them how to read. Giving encouragement. Focusing on helping them learn and improve. Staying by their side when they have setbacks. Celebrating each good test grade. And she's not keeping track of how many kids she's helped, because it's not about the numbers. She helps just one at a time.

"And know what she says? "I lose all track of time when I'm doing this." Hear that? Losing herself and gaining a soul." (Carter)

Jesus says – Who do you say that I am? If we follow the one who calms the storms...

Who then is this - who calls us to follow into the heart of those who suffer, the poor?  
Who then is this – who confounds our definitions and draws us ever closer?  
Who then is this - who pulls us away from answers and conclusions, and invites us instead  
into mystery, and belonging, and a love that gives life and reminds us to keep our  
hearts open?

The invitation to listen deeply to each other's stories and new stories in community, to let  
others begin to know you – this is sacred indeed. And that God would invite us into this  
conversation, would welcome us into this endeavor. That is love taking hold, and belonging,  
setting in. That is watching your life become both utterly lost and joyously transformed.

May we courageously follow wherever the questions lead! Amen.

Rev. William Carter, "Cruciform Community," 9/11/21

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2021/09/cruciform-community.html>

J.B Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*. Touchstone, 1952.

Rev. Kara Root, "On life lost and saved, and the big question's invitation," 9/2/12

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2012/09/on-life-lost-and-saved-aka-big.html>