

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Matthew 16:13-23

Sermon series: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Today’s answer: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God

Ben Dorr

Westminster, Greenville

November 24, 2019

Christ the King Sunday

\*\*\*\*\*

I told you recently about the puppy we got a couple months ago...

Anybody want a new puppy?

She’s all mouth right now, four months old, tries to chew everything and anything...the other day she was chewing on something she should not have been chewing on...and I said to her, “Ruthie, cut it out!”

Now our puppy’s name is Pepper.  
Ruthie was the name of our previous dog.

I said it, and I immediately realized my mistake.  
Of course, Pepper didn’t care...she kept right on destroying whatever it was she was destroying.

But why did I make that mistake?  
Old habits, right?

Sometimes what’s familiar just gets stuck in our minds, and we have trouble letting go of what’s familiar.

I don’t mean this in a bad way.  
I mean it in the most natural way.

Perhaps some of you recall that book Joan Didion wrote a number of years ago, *The Year of Magical Thinking*...anyone read this book?

It was about Didion’s life after her husband died very suddenly, in late December of 2003.

She writes that at some point a couple months later—February or March—she decided it was time to go through John’s clothes.

She packed bag after bag of clothes to give away.  
She felt “emboldened,” like she could do this.

Then she got to his shoes.  
And she realized she could not give away the shoes he wore to work.

“I stood there for a moment,” she writes, “then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.”

Then she says: “The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought.”

Her husband was dead. He had been dead for two months.  
But she held onto his shoes, in case her husband might return.<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

It’s not a crazy thing to do.  
I think it’s a very natural thing to do.

We cherish the familiar.  
Hold on to the familiar.  
Do not want to give up what’s familiar....and I think, I think, it’s always been this way.

In our text for today, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And do you remember the answers?  
John the Baptist.  
Elijah.  
Jeremiah.

In other words, they are FAMILIAR names.  
People heard Jesus, and they went...he sounds just like Jeremiah.  
He sounds just like John.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

And then Jesus asks the disciples:  
 “But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter answers:  
 “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Now that...was a NEW answer.

So Jesus commends Peter for his answer, celebrates the answer, and tells Peter that he—Peter—will be the rock on which Jesus will build his church!

And then Matthew writes that Jesus “began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

To which Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”  
 To which Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!”

How did we get here?  
 How did we go from a glorious day of CELEBRATION to this moment of confrontation??

Peter arguing with Jesus.  
 Jesus chastising Peter.  
 Eyeball to eyeball, what led to this tension?

You know what it is...  
 Peter doesn't want to let go of the familiar.  
 And that's easy to understand.

Peter loves Jesus.  
 He spends his days with Jesus.  
 He doesn't want to say goodbye to Jesus.  
 He cannot imagine life without Jesus.

And besides all that, if Jesus is the Messiah, everyone knows what the Messiah is supposed to do.

Throw out the Romans.  
 Become a King like David.

Rule in power—restore Israel’s glory.

The Messiah is supposed to get rid of our suffering.

Not undergo great suffering.

It’s easy to picture all that going through the heart and mind of Peter.

He doesn’t want to let go of the familiar...

But I don’t think Peter is the only one struggling with the familiar in this text.

Did you notice Jesus’ response to Peter?

When Peter tells Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you,” ...does Jesus say, “I understand where you’re coming from, Peter. You’re upset, so let’s take a quiet walk later today. Maybe after dinner, you and I can go out to the lake, have some time just to ourselves, and I’ll speak very gently and empathetically with you, using my best pastoral voice...”??

No.

Jesus responds with venom in his voice.

“You are stumbling block to me.”

Why would Jesus say that?

It’s almost like Peter struck a nerve with Jesus...

I think he did. I think Jesus was very TEMPTED by Peter’s response.

I think there was a part of Jesus that liked the idea of continuing his ministry—the healing and teaching and preaching and miracles—why not keep all this going for years to come?

Why not stay as far away from the cross as he can?

We get in our minds, sometimes, that Jesus always knew he would go to the cross, and he was just fine with that.

But what if he wasn’t always just fine with that?

What if going to the cross—  
 the idea that God's Son must suffer and die—  
 what if Jesus also had trouble wrapping his mind around all this too?

And even though he said he had to do it, there was a part of him that didn't want to do it.

Remember what Jesus says in the Garden?

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;  
 yet not what I want but what you want.”

The text doesn't tell us what was going on inside Jesus...

But if this is what was going on with Jesus, if Peter's proposition of staying away from the cross was tempting to Jesus...well, it gives me great comfort.

Because it means that Jesus struggled with the familiar, letting go of the familiar too.

It means that Jesus also knew what it's like to step forward in faith, not entirely certain what the future would hold...

\*\*\*\*\*

I recall once hearing about a pastor of a small church.

The church was small enough for this fresh from seminary pastor to set the goal of visiting every family in the church within the first 6 months. At the end of six months, she almost had it done.

Only one family remained, but people said: “Don't bother; they aren't coming back.”

Ignoring those words, the young minister drove out to the couple's house. The wife was home, invited her in, made some coffee.

They talked about this, they talked about that.  
 Then they talked about IT.

Two and 1/2 years earlier, the wife was at home with their young son. She was vacuuming in the back bedroom, hadn't checked on him in a while, so she went into the den—and did not find him.

Then she followed his trail—  
 across the den, through the patio door,  
 across the patio, to the swimming pool...

“At the funeral, our friends at church were very kind.  
 They told us it was God's will.”

The minister put her cup down on the table. Should she touch it?  
 Should she touch it?

She touched it.  
 “Your friends meant well, but they were wrong.  
 God does not will the death of children.”

The woman's face reddened, and her jaw got firm.  
 “Then who do you blame? I guess you blame me.”

“No, I don't blame you, I don't blame God...I can't explain it. I only know that God's heart broke when yours did.”

The woman had her arms crossed.  
 It was clear that the conversation was over.

On the way home, this pastor kept kicking herself:  
 “Why didn't I leave it alone? Why didn't I leave it alone?”

A few days later the phone rang. It was the wife.

“We don't know where this is going, but would you come out and talk with my husband and me?”

We assumed that God was angry with us;  
 now we think it's the other way around.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This story has been told by the Rev. Dr. Tom Long at various conferences of the *Festival of Homiletics*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Barbara Brown Taylor once described the cross,  
 not as “something God *desired*  
 but as *something God suffered*.”<sup>3</sup>

That makes a world of sense to me.

A job disappears.  
 A loved one gets sick.  
 What’s familiar gets swept away!

Not the will of God...but then what do we say?

When the future looks nothing like what we had planned, that’s when  
 Christ’s question becomes most piercing.

***Who do you say that I am?***

Unfortunately, it’s a question that often gets treated like a test.

Almost as if Jesus was giving his disciples a final exam long ago, or like  
 he’s giving us another test today...and you’d better pass the test—confess Jesus as  
 God’s Son—or—to quote an old Seinfeld episode, it’s no soup for you!

But I wonder if there’s another way to hear the question.

Who do you say that I am?

What if that question is not a test, but an invitation?

An invitation amidst all of life’s contradictions,  
 an invitation by Jesus to all of us:  
***To grow in our imagination about God...***

---

<sup>3</sup> From “The Will of God,” by Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Has Jesus ever asked you to grow in your imagination about God?

To see God in the people you love with fresh eyes?

To imagine God at work in ways you never pictured God at work?

Have you ever been asked to live into a future that's not what you pictured,  
but is still one in which Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God,  
is very much is alive, and at work...

Today is Christ the King Sunday.

And we proclaim Jesus as King, Son of God...

Not because he makes everything turn out perfect, but because Christ is the one who never leaves us, the one who always finds us, the one who is there with us through all the seasons of life, walking with us, suffering with us, rejoicing with us...telling us, when the time comes, that it's ok to let go of what's familiar,  
to open the door to the unknown,  
because God is on the other side...

The pastor Lillian Daniel tells the story of a very wise and kind man that she knows. Every night, this man would come home from work and look forward to a few hours alone after dinner— watching tv, reading a book,  
winding down from his day.

He wasn't single.

He was married and had a daughter.

But his wife was an early bird, he was a night owl, and their daughter was young. Wife and daughter would go to bed early, and he would stay up late every night.

But then his little girl grew up.

And when she became a teenager, it turned out that she was a night owl too. After his wife went to bed, his teenage daughter would join him in the family room.

And this became a problem.

Suddenly, it was HER hand on the remote, and not HIS.

If he did manage to get to the remote before her, he couldn't hear the television because the music from her earphones was so loud it was distracting.

He tried getting his daughter to go to bed.

"You're staying up too late. Don't you have homework?"

"I've already done it, Dad," she said.

It was the same conversation, night after night after night.

Finally, one night he said to her in exasperation, "Never mind your homework. You need to be alert for school. Staying up late will set you back in school."

She said, "It doesn't seem to be affecting you, Dad. You hold down a successful job, you don't sleep much, but people talk about what a great guy you are. What makes you think you're different?"

"I am different," he snapped. "I'm an adult, and I'm your father. You need to sleep or your grades will slip, and you'll get into trouble, and...you just need to get out of here and go to your room."

Well, his daughter's eyes filled with tears.

She said, "I get good grades. I don't fall asleep in class. I just don't need much sleep. The truth is, I'm a lot like you, and because of that, I actually look forward to our time together, and the only time I can get that is late at night. But clearly you don't feel the same way. You just want to get me out of here."

And she left the room crying, and went to her room.

After she left, he realized something: she was right!

They WERE cut from the same cloth...with one important difference. When he stayed up, he was reaching into himself, but when she stayed up, she was trying to reach out to HIM...

This difference was suddenly very obvious.  
So he stayed up all night that night, thinking and praying about what to do.  
And the next morning, he decided to reach out to his daughter IN A NEW  
WAY.

He did not talk about her grades.  
He just asked about her...

And he talked about his work days, the number of meetings and difficult  
people he encountered...

He told her he loved her, and she listened.

The next night she did not come to the family room, but stayed in her room,  
and her father's heart ached with a loss he had never expected to feel. Night after  
night went by, and he had all the time to himself that he needed, and to his  
astonishment, he didn't want time to himself anymore.

He wanted time with her.

Finally, after a week or so, his daughter entered the family room after her  
mom had gone to bed. Her father did not react outwardly, not wanting to  
overreact. So instead he watched her out of the corner of his eye, catching her  
reflection in the television screen, listening to her flip the pages of her magazine.

And he quietly thanked God for that moment, knowing that in just a few  
years this would be happening in a college dorm room instead of their family  
room.

Now if you had asked that father two weeks earlier:

Does your imagination about your daughter need to expand?  
Does your love for her need to grow?

What would that father have said?

He would have said NO.  
Of course not.  
I know my daughter and I know how to love her.

But because of a fight, he decided to pray,  
and he asked God to help him love his daughter—  
in the way she needed his love,  
a way he had never loved her before.<sup>4</sup>

And God helped him do it.

I wonder if God is asking any of us here to do the same thing.

To let go of the familiar, at some point this week.  
To love someone in a new way this week.  
Perhaps with more patience,  
or extra grace, or a NEW IMAGINATION,  
sometime during this holiday season.

Is God asking you to do something like that?

If your answer is yes, it may your most faithful response  
to Christ's question:

Who do YOU say that I am?

Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> This story by Lillian Daniel appears in her sermon "We Need More Love," in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2010.