Who Do You Say That I Am?

Our Gospel story today opens with what appears to be Jesus holding a kind of “focus group session” on a quick campaign stopover.

Jesus and his disciples are walking between towns, and he asks them:
“Who do people say that I am?”
It’s like he was conducting an informal poll:
“What are the people saying?”
“Is the message being received?”
His disciples offer up the words they hear on the street, and they all keep walking.

But then Jesus comes at them again, and this time with a harder question.
“But,” he says.
“Who do you say that I am?”

Suddenly we’ve gone from a third-person, distant kind of question, into something far more personal.
“You are the Messiah,” Peter says simply.
And it seems he’s gotten the answer right.
They continue walking.

Of the two questions Jesus asked, I bet most of us are more comfortable with the first one.
Who do other people say that I am?
It’s a lot easier to keep our distance and talk about what other people say about Jesus.
It’s more comfortable to just repeat what our church might say,
Or relate what our Scriptures tell us about Him,
Or offer what our favorite writers and pastors have eloquently written.
I know this is all true for me.
It’s a lot easier to borrow other people’s answer to this question of who Jesus is.

But Jesus moves us past that today.
And he asks the incisive question that cuts through everything else:
Who do you say that I am?

This is far more personal.
There’s a lot more at stake.

Jesus doesn’t care how other people would answer the question,
He wants to hear from you.

And what makes me nervous, is I think Jesus doesn’t want a neat and clean answer from us.
He wants the kind of answer that comes from the heart.
He doesn’t just want words and information from us.
Jesus wants commitment.¹
Jesus wants to see us live our answers out.

Why do I say this?
Let’s go back to the story, with the second scene of our passage…

**Movement 3: Back to the Gospel (scene 2)**

After Jesus’ initial two questions,
The disciples keep walking.
And the intensity of the situation seems to increase with each step.
Jesus begins to teach them.

He tells them he’s about to get into trouble – a lot of it - with the leadership of the day. There will intense rejection.
He’s going to suffer.
He’ll die.
And after three days, he’ll rise from the dead.

PAUSE

In our day, we’ve “domesticated” Jesus to the point of not really hearing the scandal of what he said on the road that day.
But the disciples heard it loud and clear.
And it horrified them:
This leader, their friend, their teacher, that they’d only just begun to fully embrace and recognize, Would be killed?

And I imagine these disciples felt some kind of ownership over the spread of this Christian movement. After all, they’d given their lives to it.
If they were in their “focus group” mindset, they knew this news from Jesus would not land well.
This wasn’t the kind of plan that drew new members in.
So Peter steps in for all of us who’ve ever wanted to sanitize the Christian message and says, “Goodness Jesus, no.”
“Not that. You’re our messiah. This isn’t what a messiah does.”

And with that comment, Peter is rebuked with one of Jesus’ most memorable and stinging statements:
“Get behind me, Satan.”

Jesus is clearly frustrated.
More frustrated than we’ve seen him before.
Because what he just said to Peter, is the harshest thing he says to anyone,
Even harsher than how he speaks to the demons he encounters,
Or the political and religious leaders who want to kill him.

Jesus is frustrated.

¹ See Nathan Jennings’ ‘Homiletical Perspective’ in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, pg. 73 for more along these lines.
He turns to the crowds that were around him,  
And he tells them that in order to follow him, they must give everything up.  
“Take up your cross, and follow me.”  
Don’t try to save your life in the meantime.  
Be willing to give even that away.

Jesus has no more use for easy answers.

And it’s at precisely this moment that our initial questions from this passage come back to haunt us:  
Who do you say that I am?

Jesus is running out of time here.  
He’s not interested in hearing more talk,  
Polished statements,  
Or marketable ideas.  
He doesn’t want a “textbook answer.”

Jesus needs our commitment.

When Jesus asks us, “Who do you say I am?”  
He’s asking it to pull us back in.

He knew what was coming next.  
…What was waiting for him in Jerusalem.  
The suffering, the pain of betrayal, and a gruesome death.

He needed to see where his disciples were before the difficult days ahead.  
He needed to make sure they’d heard the message,  
And that they’d internalized it in a deep, deep way.

And his question floats through the centuries and lands here among us today:  
Who do we say that Jesus is?  
Individually.  
One by one.  
Do we know this man Jesus?  
Do we know him personally?  
Can you call him by name?  
Has he made that much of a claim on your lives?

It makes all the sense in the world that we’d be scared.  
Because this isn’t an easy path we’ve signed up to walk.

Perhaps when you decided to follow Jesus, you thought Christ’s “goodness would protect you from the pain found in life?  
Maybe you’d hoped that your faithfulness would surround you and those you love with an invisible kind of shield?”

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2 See the Rev. Shannon Kershner’s sermon for related ideas -  
http://www.bmpcnc.org/sermons/Sept162012.htm
But that’s not what we hear today.
The way of following Jesus is one that will demand much of us.
Perhaps, everything.
A way that will take us straight to the doors of our enemies,
Where we’ll have to wait for the door to be opened, and greet them with love.
This way will lead us to caring for the people no one else wants to have to deal with.
This way will mean we can’t hide behind easy answers,
Or pretty buildings,
Or other people’s eloquence.

Who do you say that I am?
Jesus asks.

This path of following Jesus requires our personal and full commitment.
Jesus says, “You want to follow me?”
I can’t promise safety, he says.
But I can promise life.
I can’t promise protection from pain,
But I promise to never leave you there alone.
I can’t promise an easy path forward,
But I can promise freedom from fear. ³

The answers are ours alone to give.
Do we know this man Jesus who’s calling us today?
And do we have the courage to follow him where he’s going?

Amen.

³ Ibid.