

Sermon, August 27, 2023
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20
“The Journey Begins: Who Do You Say I Am?”
Rev. Nikki Baker, Lead Pastor



The Journey Begins: Who Do You Say that God Is?

Faith is more than a once and done declaration that we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Faith is more than acknowledging that we have sinned and fallen short of God’s ideal, then turning to God for help. Faith is more than a singular awe-inspiring experience with God. Faith is a journey in which we join our lives with God by trusting that Christ has made the way for us. And no matter how long we’ve been on our faith journey—from birth, childhood, or starting just today, it a seems like we are always beginning again. And we are! In Christ, each day we have a fresh start, a new beginning, and we reaffirm our commitment to be a follower of Jesus in thought, word and deed—not for our own sake, but for the transformation of the entire world.

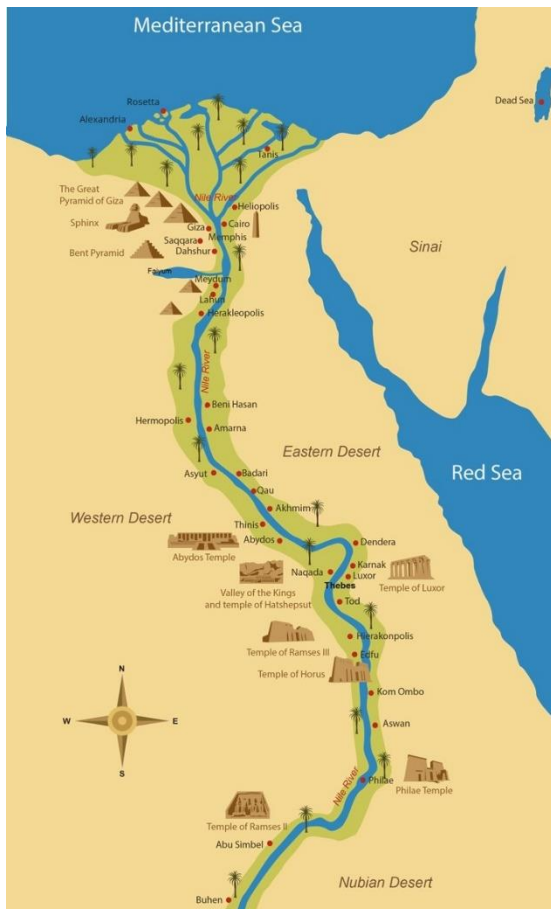
And so, the Journey Begins—again. So, let’s begin by embracing our God with joy and excitement! Today, let’s explore the core value that drives us in our journey of faith—Who do we say that God is?

Big Twin Creek in Germantown



The town where Matt and I grew up, Germantown, Ohio was in the valley of the Big Twin Creek. And even though the Germantown Dam was built there in 1920, after the flood of 1913, I was amazed at how the spring floods would change our town rhythms. When the dam was over-wrought, the Big Twin would back up into the corn and soybean fields that

one of my friend's family planted. The creek would flow across the low part of the valley and make the bridge disappear. I would have to re-route an extra 5 or more minutes through town just to get to school. The houses and other fields along Creek Road would be flooded—again. My family lived in the township—above the valley, so we didn't have to worry about our farm animals, our fields or our homes, but the flooding definitely disrupted the farming in our town. I didn't understand why farmers would continue to plant there year after year, but in the years when the floods were few and far-between, the crops in the valley were abundant because the soil there was so rich. The water could be destructive, but it brought abundance, as well.



Egypt: A River-based Nation

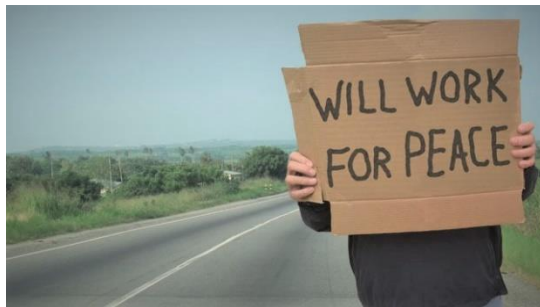
Life in Egypt was tied to water in a much larger scale. Egypt was a river-nation. The people based their whole lives within the rhythms of the Nile River. The nation was a nation made mostly of non-arable desert land, with the exception of the area nearest the Nile River. So Egyptian cities were built along the river. It provided food, it provided a means of travel, it provided rich soil, and it provided water for crops, water for washing and building materials—it provided life. But the Nile's blessing was also a source of danger. When the floods would come, when the insects would swarm, when the Pharaoh used it to keep his power, the Nile became a source of death and destruction, as well.

In our text this morning, Pharaoh had become so afraid that the immigrant Hebrews would overcome his power that he ordered the Hebrew midwives and all his people

to throw all male babies born to Hebrew women into the river to drown. He spread his own fear among his people so that they would fear the Hebrew people, as well. Pharaoh fanned to flame the fires of prejudice and suspicion of an entire people. He did not order the baby girls to die because he perceived that as they grew, they would own no land and thus, have no power to cause him harm. Interesting that Shiphrah and Puah, then his own daughter and Miriam who caused his ultimate downfall.

Pharaoh tried to turn the river—a source of abundance and life into an instrument of death. But Shiphrah and Puah trusted in God's might more than they worried about Pharaoh's might. And they remained faithful in their trust of God's presence right there with them, so they took the risk to work for life rather than participating as instruments of death.

Down By the Riverside: Choosing the Work of Life



Have you ever heard the gospel song, “Down By the Riverside”? The lyrics go something like this:

Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the
riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside.
Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the
riverside, ain't gonna study war no more.

This song is less about laying down all the heavy stuff we carry so that we can rest and more about laying down the burdens we've chosen to carry in order to work for life—in order to live the abundant life God's calling us to live rather than focusing on death. Life near the river can be dangerous, but it is where life is, so let's go!

Well, in order to get somewhere, we have to have a destination in mind and we need direction. A map is helpful, but so is a guide—someone to follow. As Christians, we follow Christ. Our leader has shown us the way of life through his humility and grace—pouring himself out that we can have a clear connection with God. Jesus is the one we follow—the one who shapes our lives and our mission and our ministry. But as He sat face to face with His own disciples, He asked them who they said that He was. He wanted them to consider who it was that they had committed their lives and the lives of their families as they followed.

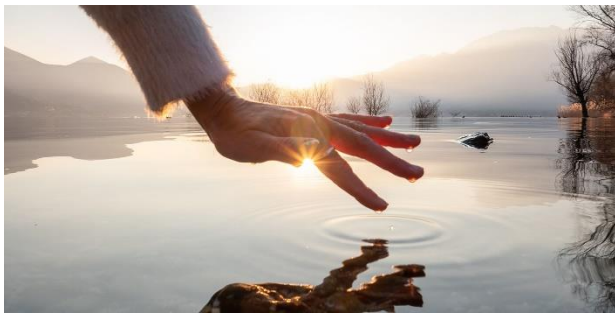
What better way for the disciples to really examine where they were headed than to consider the character and purpose of the one they had chosen to follow.

And Peter, it seems, was the one up to the task. He is the first to stand up and make the claim that Jesus is Messiah. But before Peter is honored for recognizing Jesus' identity as the one who will save us all, and is named the Rock on who Jesus will build His church—Jesus first reminds him that it is only because God revealed His nature to Peter that Peter was even able to make the claim. Peter wasn't able to recognize

Jesus as Messiah without God's help. And we are not able to make our claims to faith without God's help, either.

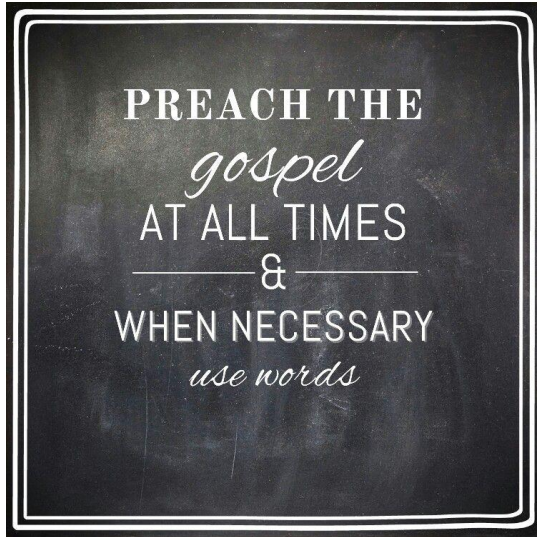
Even our most basic and foundational statements of faith do not come to us without God's help. They come to us as gifts from God to help us in our claims as to the nature of God. Here's the kicker—any voice can be an instrument of God. Moses didn't think he was a good speaker—God chose him anyway. Jacob was a deceiver and wrestled with God, God chose him anyway. Rahab was a prostitute—and yet Jesus' bloodline is hers—God chose her anyway. We can't be the ones to dismiss people because they seem like unlikely vessels of God's truth. But if we want to be able to answer the question: Who do you say that I am—shouldn't we listen to the man who was once blind but was healed, the woman who spent years with an issue of blood and was restored, the man who was once crippled who walked, and the woman of Samaria faced with so many obstacles that spread the news of Jesus' forgiveness to her whole village? What if we opened ourselves in hope and made our default position to one seeking to know Christ a position of welcome and anticipation? What if we focused on the blessing of life rather than condemning people to death? What if we were to listen for God's voice beyond our own limitations, prejudices and fears? Who might we say that God is?

Reflecting the Kingdom of God



Listening for God's voice means that we listen to the words to discern the Word. What is the meaning behind the words being spoken—does the meaning match the character of God as we know it through Scripture, through tradition, through our reasoning, and as we have experienced it for ourselves?

Jesus promises Peter, who has listened for God's voice and who has experienced God's revelation the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." And with those keys, Peter will bind or loose on earth what will be bound or loosed in the kingdom of heaven. Peter's keys were not actual keys but rather a task. The task of searching for what is bound or loosed in heaven—the task of discovering through Jesus' life and His descriptions what the kingdom of heaven is like and then reflecting that kingdom in our own living right here and right now. Jesus gave that task to Peter, and through Peter, the whole church—a body of which we are an integral part—has been given that very same task!



When Jesus ascended, He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world to make disciples—to baptize in the name of the Triune God, and to teach others everything Jesus had taught them. So, what did Jesus teach them? Jesus was the embodiment of God—He was God-man—the fully human and fully divine fleshy expression of the Creator. And Jesus came to show us that God’s love for us is so great that God poured God’s self out just so we could have a clear pathway to relationship with God. That is God’s amazing grace. It is the living God, living exactly

as God wants God’s people to live—in humility and grace so that *all* people, when they look at another person will know God’s love. Jesus is God’s love walking around inside of us by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, but there is no proof that he said it—It goes like this: “Preach the gospel always. Use words if necessary.” St. Francis was an excellent preacher himself. But it isn’t his sermons he is most known for—it is the simple and compassionate life that he lived and taught others to live that made all the difference. Maybe when Jesus told the disciples not to *tell* anyone that He was Messiah—it was because it was more important for them to simply live like they’d known Him. Who do we say that God is? Who do we demonstrate that God is by our actions? We demonstrate to the world who we say our God is by our actions. Our call is to reflect what we’re announcing to the world—letting our words flow from the witness of our lives. And through the witness of our grace-transformed lives—the whole world will be transformed by grace, as well. Thanks be to God. Amen.