

March 3, 2024  
Matthew 16:13-20  
"Praise the Mount"  
Rev. Amy Wood, Associate Pastor



Lately, on my commute, I've been listening to audiobooks- specifically mysteries. I love the twists and the turns of the story, trying to figure out how all the pieces fit together. I find myself so caught up in these that I often keep listening once I get home—you know what it's like with a book that I can't put down. I want to know how the story ends.

And then, there's that point of climax in the book when the pieces all come together—The detective or inspector or whoever gives us a crystal clear picture of what happened. In that moment, it all clicks. The picture is so clear!

If only that happened in all the great mysteries of life!!! Most of the time for these, we never get a full picture, but we might get moments of clarity, moments when the picture becomes clear before it gets fuzzy again. Moments of revelation before life enters in to cloud our thoughts and our understanding. These moments- these experiences- though, change us and can carry us through the cloudy, murky times when questions loom large and insight seems to escape us. These moments of revelation come in our experience of Jesus- In our being in God's presence- in our feeling the movement, the nudging of the Spirit.

In our Scripture today, Peter had one of these moments of clarity. One of these times when things seemed crystal clear- yet, even for Peter, it only lasted for a moment—but it was a moment that changed him forever.

It all began while Jesus was walking with His disciples, He stopped and asked them a question.... Who do people say that I am? The answers came from the disciples—"some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (v. 14). All were dead. People were trying to fit together the pieces of who Jesus is. They tried to fit Jesus within their past understanding, and they were partially right—the people saw Jesus as a great prophet- transcendent, but they didn't quite get the full picture.

If we asked today, who do people say that Jesus is, how would we answer? Probably in a million different ways- some good, some not so good because of the things that have been done in the name of Jesus.

But, Jesus goes on. Jesus turns to His disciples, those who had been following Him closely and asked, "Who do you say that I am?" This question was asked of all the disciples, but it was Simon Peter who answered, perhaps for all of them, perhaps for himself. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". He got it!

By declaring that Jesus was the Messiah- Peter was saying that Jesus wasn't just any prophet. Jesus was the Davidic descendant who would restore God's people and bring in an unprecedented era of peace, righteousness, and prosperity.

Yes! Jesus must have thought, they understand!

Peter had that moment of clarity. Yet, just like all of us, this moment would quickly dissolve as we will see next week, when we hear that maybe Peter had the right words, but not quite the understanding.

But, here's the deal— It's OK that he didn't get it all completely right. It's ok that he had more to learn and to understand. We will never get the full picture of Jesus, until we get to heaven. Every day, we can experience Jesus in different ways, and these grow and change throughout our lifetime.

When Peter professed Jesus as the Messiah, it was enough. In fact, his identity changed. Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you!" "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...." In the moment of his profession, Peter was changed forever. He wasn't Simon the screw up - who demanded to climb out of the boat and then lost faith in Jesus. He was Peter the Rock—He was the Rock before Dwayne Johnson.

His identity was changed, and I have to think that this experience with Jesus had to bring him some hope as he carried on- because Peter would make some big mistakes, yet it wasn't about what Peter did, it was about who Jesus was and who Jesus saw Peter to be.

Peter wasn't the sum total of his mistakes or even his wins- he wasn't the Rock because of his words, but because of Jesus and who He knew Peter to be.

It's not about us and the mistakes that we make, the words that we fumble for, it's about who Jesus is and who He knows us to be.

Yet, we are so afraid, sometimes, to share our experiences of Jesus. We struggle to put it into words, wondering if others will believe us or if our words are adequate or "correct". Sometimes, those moments of clarity are few and far between, and we feel like the picture has gone all fuzzy before we know what to say because our understanding is ever-changing.

Diana Butler Bass begins her book, Freeing Jesus, with an account of one of her experiences of God. She writes that she had gone into a cathedral to pray, and as she knelt, she prayed, "where are you God?" There was no answer. Only silence. Again, she asked, "Where are you God?" as she knelt before an icon that normally drew her in and brought her wisdom. Again, there was only silence.

So, she tried again, "God?"... A quiet plea, the most incomplete of prayers.

A voice came—"Get me out of here."

Was someone speaking to her? She looked around but saw no one. And, again she heard, "get me out of here."

She stared up at the icon, "Jesus, is that you?"

"Get me *out of here*" came the words as clear as day, insistent now.

But Lord....

The chapel fell silent, but she knew that she had heard a divine demand for freedom. She writes, "I wasn't sure what to think, but I knew for sure that I didn't want to tell the priest who was wandering up the aisle. I doubted that the Washington National Cathedral would take kindly to the Son of God looking for an exit."

She goes on, "I was not sure what to do. Smuggling an altarpiece out of the building was not going to happen. Instead, I got up and nearly bolted out, all the while envisioning how I might rescue Jesus from the cathedral. I felt bad leaving Him behind."

As Bass reflected, it wasn't the picture of Jesus that needed to be freed— it was Jesus, Himself. Jesus wasn't meant to be left behind in a beautiful church, talked about on Sunday but forgotten every other day of the week, Praised in beautiful words, but forgotten on the daily.

Jesus is meant to be carried outside of the church, to be a part of our everyday, to be experienced, and talked about and shared. And, that experience of the risen Christ changes, not just how we view Jesus, but how we view ourselves.

We often have a hard time talking about Jesus. We're embarrassed or afraid or we feel inadequate in our words. We shy away from telling about our experience of Jesus, perhaps, out of fear of offending others, or perhaps not knowing what to say. I mean, if you were Diana Butler Bass, how many people would you tell about hearing a painting say, "Get me out of here"? So, how do we describe Jesus? It's hard to narrow down our experience of Jesus to an elevator pitch, but when Jesus becomes a part of our lives, each of us has an experience of Jesus that we can share, and our experiences can touch the lives of others in powerful ways.

If we simply share our own experiences, in our own words, it changes us and can help to deepen others' faith, as well. Maybe you've seen some of the press for Savannah Guthrie's new book, "Mostly What God Does: Reflections on Seeking and Finding His Love Everywhere". Last week, Savannah sat down with her co-anchors from the Today show and they talked about their faith. If you haven't had a chance to see it, just Google Savannah Guthrie talks faith. Al Roker, Craig Melvin, Hoda Kotb, and Carson Daly sit down with Savannah to talk about their experiences of God's love. (They were setting Jesus free).

At one point in the conversation, Savannah says that God was like a 6<sup>th</sup> member of her family (there were 5 in the family and God made 6). She had grown up knowing Jesus, but her understanding changed over time.

Craig Melvin added that when he was young, he used to treat God as a genie- who was there to grant wishes. Anyone else been there I have. Now, Craig says that the relationship has grown so much deeper, and he describes how God/Jesus was there when his brother died and they lost his 3 year old niece. How Savannah had prayed with him at the moment when he got the call about his brother and how that had stuck with him.

Maybe you have known Jesus as a genie, a source of strength, a friend, a healer, a protector, a teacher, a stranger, an object of anger when things didn't go as you wanted....

In any healthy relationship, there is growth and change. As infants, we see our parents as our source of sustenance and our protectors, as we grow, they become teachers, at some point, in ideal relationships, they become a source of wisdom and comfort, and when they die, they become those who have gone ahead to wait for us.

Relationships grow and change. Our understanding and experience of Jesus grows and changes. When this happens, the words that we use to describe Jesus change.

Words are important. They can limit us, or they can set us free. They can wound us or bring us healing. So, our profession of faith is important. The words from the church give us guard-rails to keep us from going off the rails as we've seen happen in the past, but within those guardrails, that's where our words make a difference.

What we believe can give us hope and clarity in hard times. When we profess our faith, we remind ourselves who Jesus is. We remind ourselves of His desires for our lives. And, that changes us. It changes how we relate to the world, and it can carry us through rocky times in our lives.

Our Professions don't have to be earth shattering or mind-blowing or beautifully said. They need to be based in the truth of who we have known God to be and can be as simple as Saying, I believe that God loves us. I believe that God wants the best for us. I believe that Jesus is a teacher or healer. Like Julian of Norwich, they can be as simple as "All will be well, all will be well, and All manner of things will be well." OR, in the words, of the man who sought healing from Jesus, "I believe. Help my unbelief." Our professions change us, and they can carry us through hard times in our life.

In moments when I have felt most alone and afraid, it honestly wasn't the words of the apostle's creed that came to me, but the thought that God loves me. In those moments, that was enough.

It was enough when Savannah reminded Craig that his brother wasn't alone in dying, but he was with Jesus and that Craig could be with his brother by holding onto Jesus' hand.

It's enough to remind ourselves that Jesus wants the best for us. That the limitation prophecies- you know the ones that say that you're stupid and a failure and can never do anything right? The ones that say you aren't good enough or smart enough or faithful enough, or \_\_\_\_ enough. Those aren't Jesus's words- His words remind us that we are loved, we are chosen, we are called children of God. I believe that we are all God's children.

And in those moments, when our relationship with Jesus is the clearest, we can confess that Jesus is the Messiah- the one who came to show us the way to God. To lead us in paths of righteousness. To love us.

Each profession, each acknowledgement of who Jesus is, frees Jesus from the confines of our own making and sets Him free to transform us, to care for us, and to challenge us. None of us have the full picture, yet each profession when added together gives us a more complete understanding of Jesus... Your words are not My words, your experience is not My experience, but maybe we can help one another have a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and who He calls us to be....

So, who do you say that Jesus is?