

Can you keep a secret?

In last week's gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples were in Gentile territory. There, Jesus met a Canaanite woman and healed her daughter. Jesus then fed a crowd of four thousand people, who were most likely Gentiles as well. Today's gospel reading comes next, as Jesus and his followers make their way to the region known as Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi means Philip is Caesar, or to put it another way, Philip is Lord. Jesus and his group of disciples are far from home, in a place that declares that the true Lord is not the God of Israel, but a Roman ruler named Philip.

It is there that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" His followers give him some of the answers they have been hearing: "Well, some say that you are John the Baptist. Others say you are Elijah. Some believe that you are Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets." Then Jesus asks a very direct and personal question, "But you, who do you say that I am?"

Simon answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The word Messiah is a Hebrew word; it means the anointed one. This same word translated into Greek is Christos, which comes to us in English as Christ. But the word is the same: Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek and English.

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had been waiting and hoping for God to send the Messiah, who would be the leader of Israel. This had been their hope for centuries, through their exile in Babylon, during the invasion of the Greek armies invading in the 3rd century BCE, and when Rome conquered around 64 BCE. Generation after generation had been waiting for the Messiah to arrive, a spiritual

and political leader to usher in a new reign. As people witnessed the healing and teachings of Jesus, some believed he might be the one.

Simon was articulating the long-hoped-for answer: Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Christ. And Jesus confirms that Simon is right. “Yes, blessed are you, Simon. For my Father in heaven has revealed this to you, and from now on you will not be known just as Simon, but Peter. The word Peter literally means “Rock.” And upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give to you the church, the keys of the kingdom – whatever you bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed in heaven.” Peter’s answer was nothing less than a revelation from God. Jesus said so himself. That is how he came to know this.

I can imagine what the disciples must have felt. The great hope of their people has finally arrived and was standing right in front of them. Jesus is the Messiah. It probably didn’t take long before they begin to think, “We need to tell everyone; shout it from the rooftops, proclaim it to all the people. Send word to the authorities in Jerusalem.”

If this kind of new-breaking event took place today, we would hurry to alert the media in a well-crafted press release. We would put it on the parish website, and our Facebook page. Imagine if the disciple had the tools we have: James and John could share the news on Twitter, or X as it is now called. They could use the hashtag #realmessiah, or #jesusislord. Simon, with his new name Peter, might take a selfie of himself and Jesus, with the caption, “Hanging out in Caesarea Philippi with Jesus *the Messiah!* P.S. call me Rocky.”

Yet... here is the very next line of the story: Then Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. No press release, no sharing with your friends and families. Nothing. Tell no one.

What is this about? Peter got the right answer. The great revelation has been made known, after years and years of waiting and hoping. And now they are all supposed to keep quiet about it?

If you explore the gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you will discover that Jesus' instructions to his disciples here are typical of what he does throughout his ministry. There is a story of Jesus healing a leper and he immediately tells him, "Say nothing to no one, simply show yourself to the priest and make an offering for being made whole." There are examples of Jesus casing out demons, and the unclean spirits shout out to him, "You are the Holy One, the Son of God." And Jesus immediately orders them to be quiet. Jesus once healed a man who could not hear or speak, and as soon as the man was healed and began talking out loud, the first thing Jesus does is to say, "Be sure not to tell anyone about this."

Bible scholars have given a name to this response from Jesus. It is called the Messianic Secret. Whenever someone says to Jesus, "You are the Holy One of God," or "You are the Messiah," Jesus then orders them to keep it a secret. "Yes, you are correct," he tells the leper or the blind man. "You are right, Peter, I am the Messiah. I am the one who brings God's healing, and peace, and life. But don't tell others."

Notice how Jesus began this conversation by first asking his disciples what others have said about him. But then he asks them personally, "Who do *you* say that I am. Not what you have heard about me. Not what others may have told you. What do you believe?"

I think this is why Jesus tells them to keep quiet. He is saying, you, Peter, and Thomas, and Andrew, you, me, and every disciple, you need to come to your own answer. You who have walked with me, and have spent time with me, who do you say I am?

Everyone who follows Jesus needs to answer this question. It doesn't matter so much what you have heard others say about Jesus. This means that in the middle of *our* lives, while in worship, or at work, or at home, whether we are in Holladay, or Draper, or Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is asking, "Who do you say that I am?" Not what others say. For us Episcopalians, Jesus is not asking us the answer given in the Catechism from our beloved Book of Common Prayer. We are not being asked what we read in the latest book on spirituality. Don't quote what you heard someone preach in a sermon. Those things might be beneficial, and even true, but Jesus is asking you, "Who do you say that I am?"

We find our answer the way disciples always have, by spending time with Jesus, by listening to his words – those that comfort us and those that challenge us. By staying on this daily walk with him. And if you aren't sure of the precise answer you would give this day, that is all right. It is enough to honestly say, "Jesus, I am not sure. I don't know everything. But I will set my heart toward what I do believe, toward what I do know. I will follow that.

The Messianic Secret is Jesus' way of telling us we all need to come to faith in him on our own. Yes, there are people to help us and support us and be with us, and that is a vital part of the church community. Yes, there may be some well-written books and fine sermons, and they can help, too. But ultimately, we are going to find God in our own story, not someone else's. There is an old saying that faith has no grandchildren. In other words, it may be wonderful what old Grandpa and Grandma

believed, and you can admire the faith that your parents had. But you need to come to God and come to know God for yourself. God will not come to you in the same way that God was revealed to Peter, or St. Paul, or St. Francis or anyone else; God comes to us based on who we are, in our daily journey. God will be revealed to us in the questions that come to each of us, and in the answers we seek to discover.

The love of God is so gracious, so abundant, that there is an answer for every one of us. We are each given the invitation to encounter the living God. God will be revealed in the context of your own life – where else would God come to us? The Apostle Paul writes that by the mercy of God, we are to present our bodies, our whole selves to be a living sacrifice to God. God doesn't ask you to give another person's gifts and strengths. God wants to be made known in you, in your story. That is your spiritual worship, Paul says.

It is interesting to note that the Messianic Secret didn't really work. Jesus' request for folks to keep quiet was rarely obeyed. That is because news this good must be shared. The leper tells the whole town and soon a large crowd is gathered around Jesus. The man who finally able to speak goes off and tells the entire countryside and soon everyone comes out to see and listen to Jesus for themselves.

The invitation to know God in Jesus Christ comes to us personally; it has to. But we can't keep something this good to ourselves. Once we know God's grace, for ourselves, in our heart, we have to share it. In fact, we are supposed to. That is how the gospel spread in Jesus own day. That is how the gospel has continued to spread throughout the world ever since. This is evangelism, and it is a vow we make in our Baptismal Covenant to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

Jesus is asking you, “Who do you say that I am? In what you have seen and known in your life, in your head and in your heart, who do you say that I am?” And then offer your own honest, courageous, and faithful answer. I believe that when we do this, Jesus then speaks to us, as he did with Peter, “Blessed are you. This kind of knowing, this kind of faith, comes from God. The kingdom of heaven is within you.” Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 16, 13th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Isaiah 51:1-6 • Psalm 138 • Romans 12:1-8 • Matthew 16:13-20

Preached at All Saints’ Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

27 August 2023