

The Questions Jesus Asks: “Who do you say that I am?”
Genesis 32:24-30
Luke 9:18-38

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”

On the cusp of the season of Lent and on a Sunday when the lectionary would have us wrestle with one of the most enigmatic stories told in the Synoptic Gospels, we suspend our series on the questions you have asked and begin a series on the questions Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” “Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt?” “And if you greet your brethren only, what is unusual about that? Do not unbelievers do the same?” “What do you want me to do for you?” “Why do you call me good?” “Do you not yet understand?” “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” “Could you not watch with me one hour?” “Whom do you seek?” “Do you love me more than these?”

The question of the morning is a question Jesus asks the disciples just before he takes Peter, John and James with him up on the mountain to pray: Who do you say that I am? Biblical scholars only speculate about what led Peter to say Jesus is “The Messiah of God.” You can go back through the Gospel of Luke and point to this miracle or that saying of Jesus, but even the accumulation of these moments cannot account for the leap. That Jesus was praying alone with only the disciples near him before he asked this question has led some to wonder if the conversation Jesus was having with God became, for those closest to him, a revelation of a relationship between “God and man” that was unlike any before or since. Peter’s confession literally translated is, “You are the anointed one” as was David: you are the one who has been chosen by God and, if Peter understood the plot correctly, you are the one who has come to redeem God’s people Israel. Peter knew nothing of the fourth century Christological controversies concerning the second person of the Trinity or the debate about the “two natures”

of Christ or John's prologue presuming the preexistence of the Word. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures and so the promises made by God to God's people. Perhaps Peter said Jesus was the Messiah of God because, as one who read his own life through the lens of that story, here was a teacher who was more than the word "prophet" could contain: Jesus, meaning "God has saved," was the long-awaited answer to Peter's prayers and the prayers of God's people. Here was the servant of God who had come to unite God's people and keep them safe in the land God had promised to them. It is the prayer God's chosen people pray to this day!

How jarring it then must have been for the next words out of Jesus' mouth to be words about his suffering and rejection and death and rising. Who do you say that I am? It was as though Jesus immediately had to make sure Peter knew what he had said when he said Jesus was the Messiah of God. Suffering, rejection, death, rising. No doubt, Jesus' words sent Peter back to search the Scriptures and the plot going forward, to seek in the law and the prophets a different clue about who Jesus was.

Or perhaps it is Luke who does this seeking as he writes Luke-Acts after all these things had taken place. Who do you say that I am? Reading back from the resurrection and crucifixion as well as the trials of the early church, Luke necessarily follows Peter's confession and Jesus' anticipation of his own death with words to a larger audience about what following him day by day will require. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Why a cross? In real time, the disciples knew nothing of the way Jesus would die, but Luke knows where the story is going and hears Jesus saying to his readers—saying to you and me—that following him will have something to do with dying. Whoever you say that I am, Jesus says, know this: following me every day of your life will claim your life in such a way that you will die to yourself, that you will relinquish the life you now

possess, for the sake of the life you will be given by God. This was no supposition on Luke's part, but had become the facts of life for those who did follow him, for those who became players in the ongoing plot of God's dealings with the world that Luke recorded in the Book of Acts.

Add two thousand years to the plot and you come to us in the year of our Lord 2013 and to the question Jesus asks you and me, thanks to Luke, as directly as he asked the twelve: Who do you say that I am? On one hand, you could say that we have been given the answer by the church's creeds and confessions and doctrines. Of those who have been set apart by the community to wrestle for the name until the break of day, there are scholars more learned than we are and readers of the Bible more careful than we are who have told us in great detail about the identity of Jesus. It is, in fact, my responsibility to represent the response of Christ's church through the ages to Jesus' question in this community most Sundays, a response that partakes of complexity and controversy, of schism and endless volumes of systematic theology.

But I also believe each one of us stands singly before him and must answer his question, one way or another, with our life. Like Peter, we have the Scriptures and we have the church's theological tradition, but we also have a living Lord who continues to surprise us because he lives, even though we continue to prefer him under the wraps of human reason. Who do you say that I am? A prophet? A philosopher? A social activist? A spiritual guide? These are who the crowds say that he is and often this is what many of us in the church say too. It is about as much as can say and not have to change what we do and decide and trust and know to say we follow the Christian religion. To these confessions Jesus says "there are only two ways of doing human life: letting it go in order to find it, or hanging on. The second," says Robert Jenson "is the

geriatric pattern.” How does it happen, then, that any of us ever leap to leave the possible behind and wrestle until break of day with the mystery whose name we do not know?

For some it may happen in a burst of light on a road to Damascus or Emmaus or at the Jabbok; but for most of us here, knowing him and following him begins at the font. As little Morgan Elizabeth Evans has been born anew by water and the Spirit into this family of faith, she has been born into a community whose church school teachers and ministers will join her parents and her grandparents as together we tell her the old, old story. We do this because how else in the world will she know that God is with her and for her and has called her by name? Lillian Daniels writes of a family whose children “had only a year of church school under their belts. In the middle of what was his second Christmas pageant rehearsal ever, [their] little boy cried out in total exasperation, ‘Do you mean to tell me that we are doing the exact same story we did last year?’”

Sixty years after I first consciously heard the story as a child, I am still telling myself the same story, we are telling each other the same story because the one who was dead and is alive keeps sending us back to the story to learn again, like Peter, to read our lives through him. In fact, we who mostly resemble Simeon and Anna now are still reading the Bible together every Wednesday morning. I know this is crazy given the lives you lead, crazy to think you could take a night to do this with children’s homework and late hours at the office and so little time to catch your breath, but for the season of Lent, spur of the moment, I would love to spend my Monday nights wrestling with the meaning of the same story together, in the wild hope that we each might wrestle with the mystery until he calls our name at the break of day outside an empty tomb.

Or what if over the next six weeks you set out to take one small step toward him literally? Think of this as practice for losing yourself. Sleep with the homeless; feed hungry men at Our Brother's Place; stand vigil at Delia's Gun Shop; learn about human trafficking and begin working to end it. Sometimes "follow me" means leaving where you are and going where you would never go because he goes before you. "The call to follow," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "at once produces a new situation....The first step places the disciple in the situation where faith is possible," possible because all the other stories and institutions and ideologies and possessions we put our trust in are left behind as objects of trust. Our relationship to them is changed because to live, or to practice living, as though he were our only trust in life and in death is what it means to follow him. "But," says Bonhoeffer, "this step is not the first stage of a career. Its sole justification is that it brings the disciple into fellowship with Jesus."

Then again, if Bible study or social witness is too big a leap to contemplate this Lent, sometimes that first step might be as ordinary as leaving your own home every single Sunday morning and coming to worship where you will sing the story and hear the story over and over again and, if not make diligent use of the means of grace, then at least participate while you are here in the sacraments and the life of the community. Who knows where this will take you or with whom? Who knows if, in the presence of a complete stranger, your whole life might turn on a dime? Maybe the same thing could happen on the couch watching Meet the Press or walking in the woods after a new fallen snow. Maybe. But the story the church keeps telling again and again suggests that a more likely encounter with the living Lord may be given as you place yourself face to face with another whose life makes a claim on your well-defended and very limited and terribly valuable time. Or to put this point another way and as Daniels has said to no little bit of criticism, "Any idiot can see God in a sunset. What is remarkable is finding God in the context of

flawed human community...with people who may not reflect God back to you in your own image.”

Who do you say that I am? How does it happen that any one of us ever leaps to leave the possible behind and wrestle until break of day to be given the name above every name? Who do you say that I am? If you cannot quite bring yourself to say what Peter says or Luke or the early Church Fathers or the creeds, then try saying this one word with your life. Say love. Because at the end of the day or at the break of dawn, it is love we confess when we say “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.” Love, says Jenson, is neither a sentiment nor a feeling but is “short-hand for a narrative: death and resurrection...death and resurrection is what love concretely means.” Suffering, rejection, death and rising is what love looks like. Follow the one who loves in this way. Lose your life for Christ’s sake, let it go and you will find it in him. Thanks be to God.