

SERMON: "WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"
TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 51:1-6
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 16:13-20

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INTRODUCTION

I'm still thinking about those windows, the sermons they are preaching
I still stand in the sanctuary barefoot and look at them
And I've heard from you that you want to hear about the windows
up front too - their history and what they're telling us
We will do that later, maybe next summer

But the thing about the windows that is going to stick with me a bit longer is that
great question a few of you asked wondering ... what if we tried that today
What images would we choose? What messages would we want to convey?

Reading and praying over this passage of scripture from Matthew
where Jesus asks his followers (then and now) ... "who do you say I am?"
really got me to think about images of Jesus in particular

Let me then ask the question this way ... If we were to commission some artists
to do some work to display in this church, what depictions of Jesus
would we choose? What stories from his life and work would we want
to highlight in stained glass, or a drawing, painting or sculpture?

Would we channel Will Farrell's character from Talladega Nights, Ricky Bobby,
who prayed to baby Jesus and feature a manger, a Christmas window?
I trust we would include a cross and some Easter imagery, an empty tomb,
maybe a resurrected Christ. What else? Jesus' blessing the children,
healing someone, teaching, eating with outcasts, feeding the multitudes?

I think it's a question that will do us some good to ask. So I am asking
You'll see an insert in the bulletin for you to share your answers
You can also email or text me with your ideas. I'll take them all
put them together and let you know what images and ideas
you think would be important to memorialize in artistic expression

I think doing so might help us answer the question Jesus is asking
'who do you say I am?' That is a really good question
It was then, when he asked his disciples. It is now ... for us
I want you to think about who Jesus is to you
Keep thinking on that and I'll try to give you some context

TIME AND PLACE

There are bits of the bible that we tend to overlook, the connecting pieces almost like stage directions ... but those stage directions are important That is so often true about where Jesus goes

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus goes to Caesara Phillipi. He has been teaching in Galilee for three years He is about to head to Jerusalem to his destiny, and he knows, to the cross. That is the big shift from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south But before he heads south to Jerusalem, he goes further north It's like he's going to the seat of power in Des Moines by way of Decorah.

Why Caesara Philippi? It helps to know its real name, not the Roman one The name of the place near the headwaters of the River Jordan is Baniyas. Beautiful wooded area – a retreat. I've been there. It is beautiful. Its original name was Panyias, with a p, named for the god Pan. Pan is the one with the lute frolicking in the woods, in those woods.

This place is like Olympus, a gathering place for the gods, plural a kind of superstore for the gods, lots of choices. That is where Jesus leads his followers, an out of the way retreat ... and an intentional location for the question of who he is against the backdrop of a place with more choices of gods than there are waterparks at the Dells

Given all the possible choices, all the possible answers, Jesus asks first, “Who do people say that I am?” They answer by saying what they are hearing, and by referencing the great prophets from the past, “You remind them of ...”

He then asks more to the point, “Who do you say I am?” Isn't that the key question for them and for us? It was an especially important question for them in that place being reminded of all the choices, all the answers provided by others

And it was particularly important at that time To us a phrase you've heard me use before, Jesus in going to Jerusalem was about to go from 'preaching to meddling.' And that would be when his disciples, those following him then and there and us here today will find out who Jesus really is.

JESUS ANSWERS HIS QUESTION

Peter is quite correct in saying that Jesus is the Messiah the promised deliverer. But what Peter doesn't yet see is how Jesus is going to do that delivering. Jesus will tell us that in the verses that follow.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Jesus asks the question of his disciples ... then answers it himself
He does so by telling them what will happen, what he is going to do
Peter answers correctly stating that Jesus is the Messiah
Then Jesus tells him what a Messiah does ... and how he does it
The Messiah undergoes great suffering, is killed. And is raised again.

Jesus, with his answer to the question, points toward the cross.
That is who he is and what he does for us. That is certainly an image we would want to include to answer the question 'who do we say Jesus is?'

What other images of Jesus might you want to include?
I found an interesting collage of images of Jesus.

Show images of Jesus on screen

Some more modern than others, some ancient stained glass looking images
Some with halos or a crown of thorns, some trying to look racially authentic with a middle eastern skin tone, some looking like Jesus is from Norway
some looking like Jesus is from Nigeria. I like the diversity.

I've told you before about the artwork at the Church of the Annunciation
It is the Roman Catholic church built over what is believed to be Mary's house in Nazareth where the angel Gabriel appeared to her with the news, the news.

The courtyard around the church is filled with dozens, probably close to fifty different paintings of the Madonna and child from various countries.
Mary and the baby Jesus in each tend to look like people from those lands
The painting from Indonesia – Indonesian, from Japan, Japanese
From the US? Well that one is more modern art. Looks like aluminum foil

Show image from Church of the Annunciation

I love the diversity of that imagery ... especially considering God's love made known in Jesus is for all those people in all those places
All those looks, all those lands, all those languages

SUMMARY

So, I ask. When you picture Jesus, what does he look like?
And a bigger question ... what do you picture him doing?
What pictures of Jesus from the bible come to mind?

I look forward to looking over and compiling your answers about what images of Jesus you'd like to see. Please put them in the offering plate or email me
Maybe we could commission some artwork, put them up around the church, adorn our hallways and windows. I think it is a good way for us to answer Jesus' question ... 'Who do you say I am?'

Oh, one word of caution about images of Jesus.
You've probably noticed I asked for biblical images
Don't want you getting too carried away with your own agendas or trying to make Jesus out of aluminum foil

Jesus is not a blank canvas for us to superimpose our own ideas and agendas
He is very much God with us ... but not by us, as in our creation
a product we put in our cart at the Gods R Us superstore in Banias (or online)

The gospel accounts of Jesus' life tell us about his agenda, his priorities, what he spent his time doing, what he talked about (and didn't talk about)
We best answer the question "who do you say I am?"
by referencing what he says about himself, his show and tell

I'll try this example. I got a new church based email.
To access it, I have to go to another browser. That home page has a news feed with a variety of stories. I've clicked on some of them

Now I've noticed my home page looks like me. Some political news from various perspectives and lots of stories about Liverpool Football Club.
The algorithm has me figured out. Your home pages probably look like you probably don't feature lots (and lots) of stories about English soccer

Our various algorithms feed us what we like ... and that can be dangerous
We end up reinforcing what we already think. We miss out on being challenged by other perspectives. We end up playing follow the leader and we always play the leader. We see what we want to see

Do we do that with Jesus, see what we want to see?
Leave some stuff out, add some other stuff in?
Do we see him, really see him 'as is' and follow him

In thinking about who Jesus is to us, how we see him ...
How about we follow the algorithm written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?