**Who Are You?**

*A Sermon by The Rev. Patricia Rhoads Davis*

*Christ Church Episcopal*

Mark 8: 27-38

Year B, Proper 19

Sept. 16, 2018

This week I watched again the video from the 10th anniversary celebration last Sunday. In it people were asked what words they would use to describe our Rector, Michael and our Music Director, Tim. And the words were unfailingly kind, citing things like effective leadership, bringing out the best in people, creative, loving, and joyful. It was the road to Caesarea Philippi all over again, with our contemporary version of “Who do people say that I am?” But I was struck by how difficult it is to describe those people who make a difference in our lives.

It was the question Jesus posed to his disciples and the answers he got were as varied as the people answering: Some say you are John the Baptist, come to call people to repentance or Elijah, the hoped-for guest at every Passover Seder, the one who will usher in the coming kingdom of God and finally make everything right; or maybe one of the prophets; pick one, they all have a word from the Lord about where we‘ve gone wrong. All descriptive answers; all close but not really… So Jesus rephrases it, making the question up close and personal: “…who do you say that I am?” And now it’s getting serious, for these men who have been with him all this time must now decide: who is this who keeps us on the road to God knows where? And while they hem and haw, Peter speaks up, Peter who always speaks up, usually without thinking, Peter speaks up, “You are the Messiah.” A term no one has used for Jesus until now, a term so laden with hope and meaning and rescue and deliverance that it must have taken his breath away just to say it out loud.

So. Messiah. And Jesus takes them all from elation to devastation in a couple of short sentences. Because he says this is what his leadership will look like: “…the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected…and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Not the sort of words that would get you hired as Rector! After all, the disciples thought they’d signed up for a guided tour of the Holy Land and only now discover that they’ve enrolled in a course called Death and Dying 101. And it all started with “Who do people say that I am?”

But it’s the question we answer every Sunday morning, though I doubt that we recognize it as such. We’ve done it so many times we know it by heart, the answer to this question: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ…. God from God, Light from Light…For us and for our salvation he came down…. For our sake he was crucified… He will come again in glory…and his kingdom will have no end.” Wow. It is a mouthful of hope, a mouthful of promise, a taste of what we want to believe on our best days, a hint of what we cannot accept, like Peter, on our less-than-good days. God knows, we are often more Peter than anyone else, wrestling to hang onto belief when it all seems just a bit too awful, his self-giving and then expecting us to follow suit, to take up our cross and follow him.

Can I tell you, that’s all right? No less a theologian than Frederick Buechner has said, “If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say… you’re either pulling the wool over your own eyes or you’re trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself, ‘Can I believe it all again today?’ No, better still, don’t ask it till after you’ve read The New York Times, till after you’ve studied the daily record of the world’s brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer’s always YES, then you probably don’t know what believing means. At least 5 times out of 10 the answer should be NO because the NO is as important as the YES, maybe more so. The NO is what proves you’re human in case you should ever doubt it. And then if some morning the answer happens to be really YES, it should be a YES that’s choked with confession and tears and … great laughter.”

Laughter, because we are all Peter, faithful one minute, drowning, running away, denying the very one we love the next. Laughter, because, in spite of our best efforts, we are so very human and flawed and stumbling and still the Lord of all life loves us, still believes He can use us --- US! --- to usher in the kingdom!

So, on those days when we can’t say yes, what then? Why then we need to keep on coming here because others can say Yes. Others can say yes for us. The creed is said in community for this very reason. It begins, “We believe…” We say it together because some days we need others to hold us up and some days others need us to hold them up.

And on those days we can truly say Yes to the Lord who calls us, what then? Why then, Jesus says “Follow me,” because there are people with burdens to be shared, loads that need easing, and crosses that, like Simeon, need our help to carry. There are hungry people to be fed, thirsty to be given a drink, sick or in prison who need visiting, dying who need companions --- a whole world that needs some followers of Christ to step up and say YES. Because Messiahship, much as we hate to acknowledge it, isn’t about victory through power but victory through love. It’s a tough love, meaning it’s hard to do sometimes. But it is also the path to a life more challenging, amazing, and fulfilling that we might ever have dreamed of. It’s the very definition of abundant life.

And so on those days when we can say--- with Peter and the other so-human disciples--- on those days when we can say “You are the Messiah,” then stand by. Because the next question will be, “Who do people say that you are?” And we answer that question with our lives.