

Title: Who do you say that I am?

Date: 2/25/2024 (Lent 2, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#); [Romans 4:13-25](#); [Mark 8:31-38](#); [Psalm 22:22-30](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Lent-2-Who-do-you-say-that-I-am-e2g8qr7>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/7e6hGyjYLy4?t=1389>

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,  
and are so far from my cry, from the words of my distress?  
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer;  
and by night as well, but I find no rest.

My soul shall live for you;  
my descendants shall serve you;  
they shall be known as yours forever.  
They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn  
the saving deeds that you have done.  
Amen. (Ps 22:1-2,29-30, The Saint Helena Psalter)

These are the two opening and the two closing verses of Psalm 22, the Psalm assigned for today.

We heard the closing verses earlier in this service, and the opening verses might sound familiar from services for Palm Sunday or Good Friday. In the gospel according to Mark (Mk 15:34) and the gospel according to Matthew (Mt 27:46), those are the final words Jesus cries out from the cross.

Taken out of the context of Psalm 22, they sound like the words of a son abandoned by his father.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It's an accusation. Behind these words is a fiery anger that blazes with the rage of the heat of a thousand fires. Behind these words is an incredible sadness, the lonely cry of a son forsaken by his father, even though he has done all that was asked of him.

Heard within the context of Psalm 22, these are the words of a man who is losing hope and yet still trusts in God as he goes down into the dust. He remembers that God **has** heard his cries before, and the cries of those who came before him, and kept them safe. **AND** he is also accusing God of ignoring his cries now and allowing him to be poured out like water and his heart to melt like wax.

Jesus shows us that we can trust in God **and** be frustrated with God at the same time. We can rage at God, even as our soul lives and loves for God. We are not limited to one or the other. That would be a false binary. There aren't only two choices; there is an in-between. We can feel these feelings in sequence or all at once.

Some of us can measure our faith on a scale between one through ten. Some of us need to come up with our own process of sorting through what we know in our heads...and what we feel deeply in our heart and souls.

There are so many strands that need to be disentangled before we can knit them into something coherent and tangible. This helps us understand how we get from the lament in the beginning of Psalm 22 to the praise at the end.

An important part of making that connection is our own answer to the question that Jesus asks his disciples. It's not included today's reading, but right before the passage we heard, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answer, "John the Baptist, and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Then Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8:27-29).

This brings us to the big question.  
Who do **you** say Jesus is?

So far in the gospel according to Mark, we've also heard:  
God call him Son (Mk 1:11);  
the unclean spirits call him the Holy One of God (Mk 1:23-24);  
the scribes claim he has Beelzebul (Mk 2:22);  
his disciples call him teacher (Mk 4:38);  
and the people in Nazareth refer to him as "the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon and his sisters" (Mk 6:3).  
We've also heard Jesus refer to himself as the Son of Man (Mk 2:10) and a prophet (Mk 6:4).

Before us there are **many** answers to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Whichever answer you agree with, the follow-up question is "What does that mean to you?" or "for you?"

This week, the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, a Hebrew Bible scholar and Episcopal priest I deeply respect, shared a picture of the banner hanging from the University Christian Church in San Diego.<sup>1</sup> It reads, "Giving up bad theology for Lent."

Below that it lists out the themes for each Sunday. "This Lent, give up Purity Culture, the Devil, Biblical Inerrancy, Old Guy in the Sky, Vending Machine God, and Getting Saved."

If all of us here decide to put our heads together and create our own series, we can probably come up with our own list. The theology we've picked up depends on the kind of spiritual journey we've had. And if any of you **are** interested in pulling together a series like this for Lent next year, it's never too early for us to start brainstorming.

Regardless, the road to bad theology is paved with misconceptions about who God is and what Jesus came here to do.

Old Guy in the Sky is built on a “Father knows best” “This is all part of God’s plan” model that gives God all the praise and blame for everything that happens in the world. Humans aren’t responsible for anything except to accept what’s happening and listen to the men in charge.

Vending Machine God treats prayers and works as coins we put in a vending machine in order to get what we want. God is someone we can barter with, someone we can coerce into doing what we want. It treats salvation as something we can earn, and so we feel entitled to judge someone else for not doing what we think is necessary to earn it.

We can specifically address each category of bad theology one by one, but we will end up playing a game of whack-a-mole if we don’t ALSO address the beliefs underlying the framework that leads to these kinds of conclusions.

The great second century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyon, compares interpreting scripture to arranging a mosaic of precious jewels.<sup>2</sup>

A skillful artisan will be able to arrange the precious jewels into the image of a king. A devious artisan will arrange those same jewels into the image of a fox and try to convince other people it is the image of a king. Even when we are each given the same pieces, the same verses of scripture, we may end up with very different pictures.

The picture Jesus has of the Messiah is reflected in the work he has been doing.

The Messiah teaches and heals and casts out demons and feeds the hungry.

The Messiah proclaims the good news of God, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.”

The Messiah recruits disciples and empowers them to go out and teach and heal as he does.

The picture Jesus has of the Messiah also includes future events that have yet to unfold. He teaches his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and scribes, be killed, and rise again after three days.

Hearing this, Peter has a lot of trouble matching up the picture Jesus presents with the picture that he has imagined. To Peter, for God to break into human history through the Messiah, that means

- the Messiah will be high priest and king
- the Messiah will ride at the head of an army
- the Messiah will restore the kingdom to Israel so they will once again control their land and their economy
- the Messiah will win a great victory that will free them from the yoke of the Roman Empire.

Peter believes this because he hasn't quite grasped that the kingdom of God isn't simply a kingdom on earth that happens to be ruled by God. It's not about preserving the status quo while putting a different group of people on top. Jesus isn't trying to be high priest or king or president. The kingdom of God doesn't look the same, feel the same, or work the same as a kingdom on earth. It's not a kingdom built on might or manipulation of truth. It doesn't play on people's fears. It doesn't rely on walls or guns or threats of violence. It doesn't seek to force people into compliance.

Fast forward to Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, and Pilate enters the city at the head of a column of an imperial army.<sup>3</sup> These represent two very different models of power and authority, two very different roads to peace and prosperity.

Jesus didn't heal and teach the crowd so that they will join his army and march behind him. He taught and healed to show them God has a different vision for this world and for their life together. That's why the authorities saw him as a threat, because he showed people that they didn't have to comply with the dominant narrative, with the way things have "always been." They can be co-creators of the Kingdom of God here, on earth. The good news is that we can start re-writing our story at any time. When we repent and make that turn toward God, we're not just writing a new narrative, we can start living it.

Following Jesus means taking up the cross. Speaking of images, even though in paintings we often see Jesus or other figures carry both the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross, it is likely that they only carried the horizontal beams.<sup>4</sup> The vertical beams just stayed in place, probably for practical reasons- the soldier wouldn't have to install them every time they crucified someone- and political reasons- it's a very visible threat to get people to do everything they can to avoid taking up the other beam that forms the cross.

Looking at it this way, taking up the cross may look more like taking up a yoke. It looks like tethering ourselves to a particular vision of the world and image of the Messiah, and of the kingdom of God we hope and trust will come to be.

Jesus didn't end up on a cross because God put him there. Human beings put him on the cross because of the kind of Messiah he was, the kind of Messiah he chose to be. Political and religious authorities conspired to put him up there because he was a threat to the status quo, because an earthly kingdom they knew and could manipulate was better for them than the Kingdom of God.

His suffering wasn't the price God demanded from him to forgive us. Death wasn't his goal, life was. His death was the result of his efforts to point us toward a very different framework for living together. He encouraged us to care for one another and hold each other accountable without captivity or poverty or debts. He encouraged us to eat with those we've pushed to the margins so we can hold on to some mythical notion of our own purity or superiority. Remember the crowds that showed up around him to be healed? None of us are as alone as we think that we are, as we fear that we are.

Who do you say Jesus is?

The yoke you have taken up, where is it leading you?

When we follow Jesus, this journey will lead to the cross, **and** it will also lead to resurrection. We might keep repeating the Psalm 22 cycle of lament and praise and lament and praise. So, every time we find ourselves crying “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” may we also trust that there **will** be a day when we will look back to **this** moment and share with future generations the saving deeds of God.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=792055332966886&set=a.339181374920953>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103108.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://stfrncis.org/the-other-procession/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-crux-of-the-gospel>