

“Who Are You?”

Matthew 16:13-20

**First Presbyterian Church
August 23, 2020**

When Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut, returned from space, he is said to have remarked that he didn't see God in heaven. Soon afterward, a Moscow-based priest of the Orthodox Church responded, “If you have not seen him on earth, you will never see him in heaven.”¹ Seeing God. Where do you see God?

That is the question of today's New Testament lesson. Jesus comes to the district of Caesarea Philippi and asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” – referring to himself as the Son of Man. And they say, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

As Christians, we live our lives trying to see God more clearly, as do many people of other faiths, and even people of no faith at all. Just who is God? It's kind of an important question. It's actually the important question – the most important question facing our world right now. Our very existence, our very being depends on who we say that God is.

If we say that Jesus is like John the Baptist, we're saying that God is out there somewhere in our future, but he's not fully present here, today. That's because John represents a future vision of who God is, John was the voice in the wilderness crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Matthew 3:3), as if God is coming, yes, but for now, we're on our own. It's just not true. God is with us.

If we say that Jesus is like Elijah, we're saying that God created the whole world, us and all the creatures of the earth, and now he's finished. This is because Elijah represents the past. The prophet Elijah was sent to preserve the religious traditions of the Hebrew people, to save our faith from being corrupted by foreign gods such as Baal, worshiped by the Canaanites. If we tie God's identity solely to Elijah, we're also left on our own, as if God set the universe in motion and is just waiting for it to all to play out according to God's will. And yet, God is more than that.

And then there's this from today's scripture lesson, where Matthew tell us that, “Still others (said Jesus is) Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Jeremiah represents the present age we live in. Jeremiah was the voice of God speaking truth in his day and age – and in our day

¹ As cited by Russell M. Hart, *Crossing the Border: An Introduction to the Practice of Christian Mysticism* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1993), 69.

and age. Specifically, speaking against injustice. If we say that Jesus is like the prophet Jeremiah, we're saying that, yes, God is here with us now, but it's primarily to slap our hand and correct our ways.

And if that is who God is, then we're left waiting for this world to get its act together before we can enjoy the fullness of God's blessing, the peace and love that God envisions the world over. And if that's true – if it's dependent upon us getting our act together, we're going to be waiting a long time.

No, the truth of who God is is that God is all of this and more. As John the Baptist reveals, God is preparing the way for us, a divine way of living that we must fully embrace and boldly proclaim, sharing it with others.

As Elijah affirms, God has laid the foundations of our faith, which we must preserve as sacred, lifting up our faith over and against the gods that we and others worship, the god of money, the god of sexual promiscuity, the god of wielding power, the god of having to be perfect or right all the time.

And then there's Jeremiah. Jeremiah gave voice to the heart and soul of God, God's desire that we follow a code of divine justice. "... They have grown fat and sleek," proclaims Jeremiah, chapter 5, referring to the Hebrew nation of Judah, and no doubt also our world today. "They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy" (Jer. 5:28).

In the words of one Bible commentary on Jeremiah, "What ought to have been done for the good of all in God's land was done solely for individuals' own profit and without fear of their God for whom they were called to work."² Sound familiar? Too many people today have lost touch with the Spirit of care and concern that places the basic needs and wellbeing of others over the wants and desires of ourselves and "our people."

Yes, God is all of this and more. When the disciples point out that God is out ahead of us preparing the way (as revealed by John), and that God is the foundation of our faith (as affirmed by Elijah), and that God is calling us to selfless and universal acts of justice, care and concern (as proclaimed by Jeremiah), Jesus responds to the disciples, saying, "But who do you say that I am?"

² TOW Project, Injustice, Greed, the Common Good and Integrity (Jeremiah 5-8), <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/jeremiah-lamentations/work-related-themes-in-the-book-of-jeremiah/injustice-greed-the-common-good-and-integrity-jeremiah-5-8>

Peter answers, saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Finally, we have the fullness of who God is!

As God incarnate, Jesus is the Messiah, the savior. And not just past, present and future, but eternal, beyond time and space. There is nothing to wait for before you experience the fullness of who God is – God is here with us, here with you, now and always.

There are no other gods that we can rely on or turn to as the foundation of who we truly are. Anything and everything that we put above God in our lives is a false god that can't be relied upon. And there is nothing that God wants from you except that you love God and love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And as they answer, Jesus turns the question back on them, as if to say, “Who are you showing yourself to be?” Are you a people waiting for some miracle to occur out in the future? Are you a people relying on the past? Are you a people lost amid this present day and age? Or are you living today and everyday in the fullness of who Jesus is as your Lord and Savior?

When Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God – tapping into the fullness of our faith and the clarity of divine insight – when Peter does that, Jesus turns the question back on him and says, “... You are Peter (which means “Rock”), and on this rock I will build my church.” That is who I say you are.

Of course, we are not Peter. But we are the church. And as the church – individually and collectively – our calling is to embody the faith in all that we do, and to challenge, equip and inspire others to do likewise.

Think about it. What ways might you be called to inspire others to step into a life of faith. Think about it. Consider your God-given gifts and talents, and ask yourself are you using them to build up the community of faith and better the world around you. Are you? Look at the people God has put in your life, and identify at least one whom you will bring into the family of faith, with God's help. This is who we must be, because, like Peter, you also are the rock on which Jesus is building his church.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Our prayer begins with a prayer written by Martin Luther around the 16th Century:

Lord God, heavenly Father, we know that we are dear children of yours and that you are our beloved Father, not because we deserve it, nor ever could merit it, but because our dear Lord, your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, wills to be our brother, and of his own accord, offers and makes this blessing known to us. Since we may consider ourselves his brothers and sisters, and he regards us as such, you will permit us to become and remain your children forever.

Thank you, O God, for counting us among your children through our faith in Jesus Christ. As children of God, we depend on you for all things, and thank you for a life of peace and love beyond our ability to imagine or claim without you at the center of our lives.

We pray your presence – your peace and love – for those who need it most at this hour, and especially for and all the friends and loved ones we hold dear.

Keep us ever mindful of our place in the family of faith, Lord Jesus, as we strive to forever remember the love you embodied, the peace you shared, and the prayer that you taught us, the Lord's Prayer that we pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**