

“Who Is Jesus?”

Isaiah 51:1-6 & Matthew 16:13-20

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God says through the prophet Isaiah, **Isaiah 51:1-6** “Listen to me, all who hope for deliverance—all who seek the Lord! Consider the rock from which you were cut, the quarry from which you were mined. Yes, think about Abraham, your ancestor, and Sarah, who gave birth to your nation. Abraham was only one man when I called him. But when I blessed him, he became a great nation.” The Lord will comfort Israel again and have pity on her ruins. Her desert will blossom like Eden, her barren wilderness like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found there. Songs of thanksgiving will fill the air. “Listen to me, my people. Hear me, Israel, for my law will be proclaimed, and my justice will become a light to the nations. My mercy and justice are coming soon. My salvation is on the way. My strong arm will bring justice to the nations. All distant lands will look to me and wait in hope for my powerful arm. Look up to the skies above, and gaze down on the earth below. For the skies will disappear like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a piece of clothing. The people of the earth will die like flies, but my salvation lasts forever. My righteous rule will never end!”

Who are you? How would the answer change if you asked your family who are you? What about your employer, those you do activities with, your best friend? What would the voice within your head say about yourself? If you were best friends with your self what would you say?

The answer regarding, who you are, varies depending on the person asked and the lens you are using. Your identity shapes the way you think, feel, live, serve, love and rejoice.

Matthew 16:15 “Jesus pressed them, “And how about you? Who do you say I am?” How do you answer Jesus’ question about who he is? Often our first impressions of God come from our parents. We tend to project onto God the way our parents treated us. If we attend church, we often define God by what the church tells us about God. Scripture reveals God. Art, music, and movies color our impressions of God. Often pictures of Jesus portray him as white with blue eyes and long flowing hair, all of which are highly unlikely. Jesus likely had dark skin, brown eyes, and short hair. The artist usually portrays Jesus with similar features as themselves or the people paying for the painting. There is not a single descriptive word of Jesus physical appearance anywhere. Often, we think that God is like us, especially when it comes to our morals. How we answer who Jesus is, is of utmost importance because it determines how we answer, who am I, what would Jesus do, and what does God desire for me to do.

For a moment set aside all you know about God. What do your experiences of God tell you about, who God is? Your experiences of God is anytime you felt wonder, awe, perfect love, complete peace, robust joy. If you ever had a moment when you felt whole, belonging, contentment, a moment that you wished would never end, then you experienced God. What do these experiences tell you about who God is?

When Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am,” he was 32. In the second year of his ministry of traveling, teaching, and healing. The disciples and the crowds knew the following about Jesus, he was born in unusual circumstances and of questionable, scandal filled, parentage. Jesus is from a poor family, yet his birth attracts foreign diplomats and threatens a king who is trying everything to find and slaughter Jesus. Rather than stay at home and take on the family carpentry business, as expected of a Jewish male, he becomes a wandering teacher who leads a ragtag group of disciples. Rather than getting married, which was also expected, he remains single and unattached. Jesus has no visible means of income, and yet spends a lot of time at parties and provides wine and food for thousands. Jesus performs incredible miracles, but never uses his power to benefit himself. Jesus casts out evil spirits but at the same time, is blamed for being in league with them. Jesus is a student of the law of Moses, but teaches that the law does not fulfill God’s desire for us to love. Jesus appears to be a pure person but hangs out with the dregs of society. He even eats and drinks with outcasts. Jesus talks about eternal life but seems to be obsessed with death and, in particular, his own death on a cross. It is little wonder that people were confused. The guessing game took place every time he appeared in public, even among his closest associates.

To someone made well by Jesus, he is a healer; to King Herod, a traitor; to the disciples, a teacher; to the religious leaders, a troubling agent of change; to criminals, a forgiver; to seekers, a revealer of the way; to

outsiders (women, children, Gentiles) a friend who welcomes them into community; to Mary and Joseph, their son; to the poor, an advocate for equality, to angels, glorious love and joy in human form; to the 12 disciples, a person exuding grace that inspires them to leave everything and follow; Jesus is something unique to each and every person.

The gospel of John declares, **John 1: Select phrases “The word was in the world and the world came into being through Jesus yet the world do not know Jesus.”** How can humanity not know our Creator? Susanna Metz believes it is because goodness, love, and fairness are threatening to those who seek power. Most want to be in control. One way we attempt to control God is by defining God and putting God in a box. If we do not know God, our creator, then we do not know our self. If we try to control God, then we try to control others and our self, stifling love and joy.

It appears that Peter let go of what others said about Jesus, let go of what scripture revealed about Jesus, let go of what tradition said about Jesus, let go of his own impressions of Jesus, enabling Peter to let come a revelation about Jesus from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 16:13-20 MSG “When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Jesus pressed them, “And how about you? Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter said, “You’re the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus came back, “God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I’m going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out. “And that’s not all. You will have complete and free access to God’s kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven.”

The location and context are important. Caesarea Philippi was built by Herod Philip in honor of emperor Caesar who was hailed as a god. Biblical Scholar Isabel Anders says, “Peter’s answer ‘Son of the living God’ places the role of the Messiah within the reign of God and apart from any nationalistic or militaristic connotations.” In essence, Peter is the first to declare separation of church and state. Jesus then blessed this distinction. Today, we need to recover and affirm separation of church and state. No country or person, no Caesar or political party, no policy or law is God, or even represents God. The Triune God is far more holy and glorious than any of our earthly leaders, systems, customs, practices, laws, and rubrics. God alone is worthy of worship. God alone is the source of love, joy, and goodness.

Caesarea Philippi was located by a cave that many believed was the residence of the Greek god Pan, the half-man, half-goat god of fright (from which comes the word “panic”) and the entrance to hell. Peter’s answer speaks against living in fear, worry, and anxiety, against death, for Jesus is Son of the living God. The God of life and goodness. Jesus clarifies that hell, fear, death is no match for God’s love, joy, and life. The power of the Triune God has no equal. The Kingdom of Heaven will prevail and will be established on earth.

Next Jesus contrasts Peter, the holder of the keys, with many of the religious leaders. Peter, the church, and us are to be people who open the realm of heaven to others, people who embody and spread the grace of God. Rather than many of the religious leaders who lock people out with their division, judgement, categorizing and exclusions.

The “yes” versus “no” on earth and in heaven can be understood in the light of a Jewish synagogue custom regarding vows of binding and loosing. In the rabbis’ use of this term, to bind, (a no) was to declare something obligatory, whereas to lose, (a yes) was to leave it to individual judgement. Each person is free to determine what is the most loving way for themselves. And, each person is part of a community who seeks the most loving way for the group. Each person formulates their own unique answer regarding “who is Jesus” and “who am I”. We gather together to share our insights continually expanding our perception of God and striving to answer Jesus questions for us as a group.

Paula Franck said, “Who do you say that I am?” There are as many answers to Jesus’ question as there are individuals who respond. Some say Jesus is a prophet, great teacher, moral leader, or liberator. Others see him as God in the flesh, a mystic, a revolutionary, our personal savior, redeemer of the world—the one who teaches us how to live. Scripture describes Jesus as Son of God; Emmanuel; servant; lamb of God; high priest;

firstborn of all creation; the bright morning star; the Word—the first, the last, the beginning and the end. Jesus describes himself as the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the vine; the way, the truth, and the life. The list could go on and on, since Jesus embodies all of these—and more.”

Henry Beecher said, "This loving God," you say; "I can't do it. How can I love infinity -- omnipotence? I might as well try to love a cloud, or to try to embrace in my warm palpitating affections the vast expanse of ether." True, you cannot love God; you cannot love this expansive, mysterious essence of omnipotence. God knows very well that you cannot; and for that reason, among others, God condescended to bring Godself down to your capacity -- to come within the reach of your affections in the person of Jesus Christ. "God manifest in the flesh." For my soul I pity that person who goes behind Christ and tries to fasten themselves upon God unrevealed. As you say, they may as well seek to embrace with warm love the elastic and invisible air.”

Rob Bell said, “When people use the word "Jesus," it is important for us to ask who they're talking about. Are they referring to a token of tribal membership, a tamed, domesticated Jesus who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to? Are they referring to the supposed source of the imperial impulse of their group, which wants to conquer other groups "in the name of Jesus"? Are they referring to the logo or slogan of their political, economic or military system through which they sanctify their greed and lust for power? Or are they referring to the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with God's love and power and grace and energy?”

Joseph Farber said, “People often think of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as beings, as if they were pagan gods, at which point the whole notion of God as Trinity makes no sense. If you understand God as “above and in and through all things,” in Whom “we live and move and have our being”; the Logos or Word of God as that which “spoke the world into being” manifests itself in the multiple logoi of beings, and became incarnate in Jesus; and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of love which is essential for both life and meaning, then you'll be a whole lot closer to understanding the faith of the first Christians, and the whole of the Bible will make a lot more sense to you, without requiring you to ditch science, reason, and intellectual integrity.”

Pastor Rachel Hosmer had a dream about ordering from the Sears catalogue. Only it was no ordinary catalogue. In it, she could order the Jesus of her choice. There was Jesus as a seminary professor, with books and tweed jacket. There was Jesus the farmer, with calluses on his hands and dirt under his fingernails. There was a suburban, churchgoing Jesus in a suit and tie. There was a Latino Jesus, and an African-American Jesus. There was a feminist Jesus, who enabled the bent-over woman to stand up. In her dream, Rachel chose one and ordered that Jesus. She received a Jesus, but it was different from the one she had ordered. She requested another Jesus, and again she got an alternate Jesus from the one she had chosen. This happened again and again. Every time she received a variant from the one she had ordered. And every time, it really was Jesus whom she was given. The message of her dream finally became clear to her. Jesus would come into her life; but he was always different from her expectations, always wonderfully surprising.” Our expectations narrow our vision, allowing us to see only that which is compatible with our personal vision.

May Jesus' question to you, of “who am I” expand your perception and wonder of God for eternity, ever multiplying your love and joy. Amen