Who Do You Say That I Am?

Exodus 1:8–17, 22; 2:1–6
Matthew 16:13–20

Most of us know how to answer a question when somebody else has already given us the answer. We learned that in school. The teacher asks a question. Nobody is quite sure. Then somebody across the room raises a hand and gives an answer that sounds pretty good. And suddenly the rest of us are thinking: *Yes. That's what I was going to say.*

There is a difference between repeating an answer and discovering that the answer has become your own. Jesus seems to know that. He asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They have plenty of answers. John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah. One of the prophets. They know what everybody else is saying.

Then Jesus asks the question he was heading toward all along: **"But who do you say that I am?"**

There is something hidden in our English translation. The Greek word for "you" is plural. Jesus isn't singling Peter out. He is looking at all of them. We might hear it: **"But you all—after everything you have seen—who do you say that I am?"**

Peter speaks. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Christians have spent centuries asking what Jesus means by "this rock." Peter himself? Peter's confession? The faith expressed in that confession? We don't have to settle that argument this morning. Because before we decide what the rock is, notice what happened. Jesus asked the whole community a question. One disciple found the courage to answer. And something began.

Maybe that's where the church keeps beginning. Not when everybody has everything figured out. But whenever ordinary people stand before Jesus Christ and risk building their lives upon what they have come to trust. Jesus wasn't giving Peter a theology examination. **He was asking a question upon which a life could be built.**

And Exodus begins with another man who has built his life around an answer. A new Pharaoh comes to power. Scripture says he "did not know Joseph." He looks at the Hebrew people and decides who they are. A threat. And once Pharaoh sees people as a threat, he begins treating them as one.

Fear has done something terrible to Pharaoh. **It has not merely frightened him. It has taught him how to see.**

Then Scripture gives us two women. Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh orders these Hebrew midwives to kill the boys born to Hebrew women. They refuse. Scripture says, "The midwives feared God." Pharaoh fears losing power. The midwives fear God. And because they know who God is, they see those children differently. Pharaoh sees a threat. They see lives that belong to God.

Then Pharaoh's own daughter finds a basket among the reeds. She opens it. A child is crying. She knows what Egypt has been told to see. But she looks. And she has compassion. Her father sees a threat. She sees a child. And Moses lives.

Pharaoh had the power to command Egypt. But these women had the freedom to see.

Perhaps that is what our deepest beliefs eventually do. They teach us how to see.

Which brings us back to Jesus. “Who do you say that I am?” If Peter is right, his answer changes the way everything else is seen. Look at the Messiah Peter has been watching. Jesus touches people others avoid. He eats with people others condemn. He notices people others overlook. He forgives. He heals. He gives rather than grasps. And eventually he will lay down his own life rather than demand the lives of others.

Pharaoh asks: **How do I protect myself from them?** Jesus asks: **How do I give myself for them?**

Two ways of seeing. Two ways of living. And somewhere between Egypt and Caesarea Philippi, Scripture asks what kind of life our answer about God is creating.

Because it is possible to say all the right things about Jesus and still live as though Pharaoh is Lord. We can confess Christ on Sunday and be governed by fear on Monday. Our lives eventually reveal what our lips mean when they say: “Jesus is Lord.”

And here is the grace. Peter doesn't understand everything he has just confessed. Before long he will misunderstand Jesus. He will make promises he cannot keep. Eventually he will deny even knowing him. And still Jesus does not give up on Peter.

Whatever else Jesus means by “this rock,” surely the church cannot be built upon human perfection. **There has never been enough of that to build with.**

The church is filled with people who confess and stumble. People who believe and doubt. People who fail and discover that grace allows them to get up and answer again. People like Peter. People like us.

We have inherited Peter's confession. But we cannot live forever on Peter's answer. Every generation eventually stands with those disciples. And Christ asks again: **“Who do you say that I am?”**

We answer when forgiveness costs us something. We answer in the way we treat someone who frightens us. We answer when another person has been reduced to a label. We answer in what we grasp and what we give away. We answer in whom we welcome. We answer in how we love.

Not perfectly. Peter certainly didn't.

Christ does not wait for perfect disciples. He calls ordinary, unfinished people. People still learning to see. People still learning to trust. People still becoming what grace has called them to be.

Perhaps this is why the church is still here. Not because Peter got the answer right once. And certainly not because Christians have always gotten it right since. God knows we haven't.

The church is still here because Christ has never stopped asking the question. Across centuries. Across nations. Across generations. The same Christ turns toward ordinary, unfinished people and asks: **“Who do you say that I am?”**

Peter answered. Shiphrah and Puah answered with their lives. Pharaoh's daughter answered when she looked into that basket. And now the question has reached us.

We do not have to answer it perfectly. But we do have to answer it.

Perhaps that is the rock: not certainty without doubt, not disciples without failure, but a community that keeps turning toward Jesus, keeps trusting, and keeps building its life upon the answer.

Because the church does not live simply because Peter once answered the question. The church lives because Christ keeps asking it.

So now—

Who do you say that I am?

Amen.