

Scripture

Psalm 116:1-9

- 1 I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
- 2 Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
- 3 The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- 4 Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“O Lord, I pray, save my life!”

- 5 Gracious is the Lord, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- 6 The Lord protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
- 7 Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

- 8 For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
- 9 I walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.

Mark 8:27-38

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me

and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Sermon:

‘Who do people say that I am?’

That was Jesus’ question to his disciples as they were walking down the dusty highway to Caesarea Philippi. It sounds like an idle question to pass the time.

The disciples reported back that people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. This always confused me as, to my knowledge, Jews don’t subscribe to that kind of idea of reincarnation, of old souls coming back in new bodies. Perhaps they meant that Jesus was like these men – a strong prophet, anointed of God, sent to call God’s people back to himself.

After some discussion, Jesus switched gears and became more serious. He turned to the disciples and put them on the spot. ‘But who do you say I am?’

This is a bit of a loaded question, and not so easily answered. Certainly replying with ‘you are Jesus of Nazareth’ is going to be altogether inadequate. Jesus is not asking if the disciples know his name. It’s a much deeper question.

Jesus is really asking ‘What do you know about me? Or think you know? What is your understanding of who I am and why I am with you?’

These were, and still are, weighty questions – not to be taken lightly.

Not surprisingly, it was Peter who had a response for Jesus. ‘You are the Messiah – the anointed one’ declared Peter. A good answer. The right answer.

And yet, upon receiving this right answer, Jesus instructed the disciples not to speak further of this to anyone. Sternly. This seems odd. Why would this be?

Let’s read further, and see if we can find out.

After instructing the disciples to keep silent about his identity as Messiah, Jesus began to share with them what the coming weeks would bring. Jesus spoke of great suffering, rejection, betrayal, and death. He also spoke of resurrection, but it seems that by the time he got to that point nobody was listening any more, so great was their shock.

Peter was so upset that he drew Jesus off to the side and began to rebuke him. The text doesn’t give any details about the form this rebuke took. Was Peter telling Jesus that he was wrong and that these things were not going to happen? Did he swear to protect Jesus? Or was

he admonishing Jesus for telling the men these things and allowing them to become demoralized?

We don't specifically know the content of the rebuke, but we do know the result. Jesus turned to the disciples so that they would be witnesses to Peter's chastisement. 'Get behind me, Satan!' He said. 'You are not thinking divine things but human things!'

This is a strong indictment, indeed. There is not much that Peter can come back with.

The charge Jesus levied against Peter, that he was thinking human things, not divine things, is something that we ought to pay a good deal of attention to, especially given the context in which this exchange took place.

The flow of the story is that Peter discovered, or named, a particular revelation about Jesus, Jesus responded, Peter rebuked, and then was rebuked himself.

Here's what seems to have happened. Peter got it right when he called Jesus the Messiah. Jesus was, and is, the anointed one of God. Where Peter got into trouble was when he had the chutzpa to tell Jesus what it meant to be the Messiah.

To Peter, and most of the Jews at the time, the Messiah was to be a descendent of David who would assume the throne, kick out the troublesome Romans, and make Israel great again. Peter was quite confident in his expectations, so when Jesus began to speak of sacrifice, suffering, and death, Peter was quick to correct him, and tell him what being the Messiah really meant.

Peter dared to tell Jesus what he ought to do. Peter tried to put Jesus in a box, to limit almighty God in his plans and purposes. Pretty brash; pretty arrogant, and well deserving of a public scolding from the one who was present at the dawn of creation itself.

But, here's the thing. Peter isn't that unusual, he just had the boldness to say what he thought out loud. Perhaps the only thing that makes Peter stand out is that he is in some ways a man out of time. Peter's attitude of knowing superiority would fit in quite well in present day society.

The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries were marked by an ever increasing emphasis on reason and knowledge. As humankind's knowledge and abilities grew, our confidence in our own abilities grew as well.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Our increased knowledge has increased the span and quality of life for billions. Vaccines, rail systems, democracy, microwavable pizza pockets – there are many, many ways in which our reason has served us well.

The trouble is that our reason has served us so well that we lose track of the fact that reason is only one tool in our toolchest of being. In some ways we can resemble the alien beings that we find in movies – with oversized heads and atrophied bodies.

We value right thinking – correct thinking. But, we run into problems when we act as though correct thinking is always the most important thing. You don't have to go any further than remembering the last conflict you had with your spouse. Rarely is that conflict resolved by determining who is correct and who is wrong. Despite the fact that we seem to value correct thinking, most people don't respond well when their thinking is 'corrected' by others. There are other factors at play – right thinking is only one among many things to take heed of as we go about our lives.

In particular, we run into trouble when we make 'correct thinking' the cornerstone of our faith. This will be a sensitive topic for some – stay with me for a while before you make up your minds.

Doctrine has a place in our faith community, as does tradition, and teaching. As your teaching elder, I can hardly say that teaching is not important. Correct thinking is a necessary component of faith. But not always the most important one.

Correct thinking gives us a sense of certainty – that we know what is going on. We write and recite creeds and catechisms and set up defined boundaries beyond which we cannot stray. Right thinking allows us to pass on to the next generation the gift of our faith. Religious structures provide us security and a sense of self.

Where we run into trouble is when we are so focused on right thinking that we lose sight of the fact that our faith is not primarily about what we think, but instead is primarily about relationship.

Right thinking about God is not transformative to your soul. It is the active Spirit of God that lifts us out of the mire and the muck. Right thinking points us in the direction we need to go, but it is not the thing in itself.

When we make right thinking the most important element of our faith we become preoccupied with being right. Being right becomes equated with being righteous or holy. Our certainty becomes dogma, and somewhere along the line find that we have moved from right thinking into not thinking at all – merely repeating slogans and truisms.

When we reach this point we are no longer stand for love and community, but instead we foster anger and division; we become more concerned with policing other people's thoughts and actions than in seeking the life giving God.

We start thinking that we know what church God goes to, what Bible translation God prefers, how God votes, what movies God watches, what books God reads, and which people God approves of.

This is what Peter Enns calls the sin of certainty, when we forget that we are human and delude ourselves into thinking that we can transcend our tiny place in the human drama and see from on high, as God sees. The sin of certainty is very closely related to pride.

The worst thing about the sin of certainty isn't even the arrogant tribal divisiveness of it, the worst part is that our certainty quenches the spirit and dares to limit God. This is the trouble that Peter found himself in when he took it upon himself to school Jesus about the role and responsibility of being the Messiah.

When we think we have all the answers we sell God short by keeping the Creator captive to what we are able to comprehend. We think we can fit God into our mould. It's not unlike the Israelites making idols of wood and stone – thinking they could encapsulate or encase God in a figurine and tuck him away on a mantle somewhere.

We no longer make physical images of God, but we do make mental ones, and they serve the same function – to tame God, domesticate him, and allow us to feel as though we have some level of control.

We need to forsake the sin of certainty.

Letting go of the need to be certain is not the same as letting go of thinking, and in fact, once we release our deathgrip on dogma we leave ourselves open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the possibility of thinking divine thoughts instead of human thoughts.

What makes letting difficult, however, is that certainty is our security. The mental fortresses that we construct keep us all together in the same safe religious space. It's our sandbox environment. To give it up takes courage; it feels a little bit like dying.

And as we continue to read the text this is exactly what Jesus began talking about next. 'Those who seek to save their lives will lose them,' he said. 'But those who lose their lives for my sake will be saved.'

When we construct protective walls of rules, regulations, and 'right thoughts' we are seeking to save our own lives. But none of us created our own lives, so to think we can save them through our own force of will is simply hubris and foolishness.

We need to stop trying to save what we did not create. Instead, Jesus said, lose your life for my sake.

Losing our lives for Jesus sake does not mean giving up or throwing everything away – becoming helpless or passive. It means learning how to trust Jesus more than we trust in our own preconceived ideas.

How would this have altered the exchange between Peter and Jesus? When Jesus told the disciples that he would have to suffer and die, what if instead of saying ‘No, that’s not how it works’ Peter had asked ‘Why must you suffer and die?’

Peter could have learned something incredibly deep and profound, something divine. Let me reiterate that. By laying aside what he thought he knew, Peter could have learned something life-changing. You’ve got to lose your life in order to save it.

Peter’s problem, and the problem that many of us struggle with, is that we trust our beliefs more than we trust God. It’s not what you believe but in whom you believe. Believe is a who word, not a what word.

Place your trust in Jesus because trust remains when reason fails us. Or betrays us. When we don’t see or understand what God is up to.

When Peter stepped out of the boat to dance on the water with Jesus, was he trusting what he knew, or was he trusting Jesus?

When we die to what we think we know and instead simply trust we are led to a much bigger God than the one we imagined. A much more interesting and caring God.

Die. Release yourself from the limitations of your imagination. Instead, embrace radical trust. Ask questions of God, get out of the boat, pray for those who persecute you, love your neighbour, give until it hurts, do not return evil for evil. Do all those crazy sounding things that Jesus told us to do. Then see what God does in your life.

Choosing to trust the Creator, to put relationship ahead of rules, will unleash a faith that is open to the ever moving Spirit and new possibilities, rather than restricting the ability of God to work in our lives.

And choosing to trust the Creator will make possible a faith that encourages us to reflect thoughtfully about God rather than mindlessly repeating dogma.

Set your mind not on human things, but on divine things. Hold these words from Jesus close to your heart ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.’

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.