“There is No Me in Messiah”
Isaiah 10:24-27, Matthew 16:13-20
12^{th} Sunday After Pentecost – August 23, 2020
Guest Preacher: Daniel Crump

It’s back! This passage came up in the lectionary with my name on it three years ago, just before Pastor Laurie joined us. For someone who doesn’t write all that many sermons, it is pretty weird and probably meaningful to be called back to the same one twice. Maybe it’s my own personal Groundhog Day. Doomed to repeat it until I get it right.

I said then and will gladly repeat that this story is possibly the most important of all of Jesus’ teachings in my life of faith. I have spent a good deal of time with spiritual practices that begin with the question, “Who am I?,” which begs the question, “Who is asking?” The student comes to the master and says, “I can’t calm my mind,” and the master says, “Show me the mind you cannot calm.” It can lead to some profound realizations about the nature of what we sometimes call the self.

Another practice begins with the question, “What is It?,” which looks deeply at the presumption that there is an independent “me” separate and free to regard anything, let alone “It.” Again, profound realizations as to the nature of what we sometimes call, “reality.” And out of these realizations, potentially, a certain cessation or momentary relief of the suffering of a self whose nature or existence is free enough to call itself into question.

Amid these and other realizations, I discovered this passage from Matthew. It appears in slightly different forms in the other two synoptic gospels, Mark and Luke. “Who do you say that I am?” I thought, wow, taken as a practice, this question could provide even more distance from a suffering self by placing the regard of one’s self in the hands of another. Perhaps it might cultivate a deeper sense of community. Perhaps it even holds the potential to bring Christianity back from the irrelevance to which it often seems determined to doom itself. I had no idea.

Skip to January, 2012, my first semester at Chicago Theological Seminary. The class was “Psychology of the Oppressed.” It was made up primarily of brilliant Black doctoral students from seminaries all over Chicagoland. I was virtually the only male-gendered, European-American in that class. The class turned out to be a rare window into Black suffering and the stifled cry for justice white America almost never sees or hears.

I learned what it truly means to ask the question, “Who do you say that I am?,” and I learned what it means to stick around and listen to the answer when I am gifted with the rare opportunity to hear it. I drove the 5 hour trip to Chicago and back every week, and I am sure I was in tears at some point during each trip that semester. I will always be grateful to the excruciating brilliance, courage, and love of my sisters and brothers in that class.

But, I focused on the question in my last sermon on this text. I want to turn this time to Jesus' incredible command to his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. Of all the snippets of scripture the biblical literalists take literally, the vilification of Jews, the subjugation of women, the justification of slavery, the condemnation of same gender love, I so wish they hadn't overlooked this one.

Jesus pretty much makes the claim himself several times, and he appears to call Simon Peter "blessed" for saying it. Why in the world, then, would he "sternly" order the disciples not to tell ANYONE? Notice, he didn't say until such and such time or after this event or another. This is one place he put a period, not a comma. Of course, we Christians have been blabbing it all over creation for thousands of years with both good and evil results. Maybe we should sit down and at least consider the question.

We could start with: "What the heck is a Messiah?" It comes from the Hebrew word, *mashiach*, which translates literally "the anointed one." The Greek word, Christ, means the same thing. In simplest terms, anointing amounts to little more than the old hair oil commercial, "A little dab'll do ya," but simplest terms very rarely apply when it comes to scripture. "Mashiach" refers to the practice of anointing kings in ancient Israel. King Saul was the first, followed by King David. Presumably, every subsequent king was anointed as well. It was a formal way of assigning divine authority to the community's leader and often was accompanied by the title "son of God," to explain the transfer of divine authority in terms of a familial connection. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and forced exile of its leaders in 587 BCE, however, the term took on a meaning of hopeful expectancy that God would one day restore Israel to its former greatness.

Some Hebrew scholars warn us Christians against conflating the term *mashiach*, "the anointed one," with *moshiah*, one of several Hebrew words that means "savior." However, Daniel Boyarin, contemporary Jewish-American academic, points out passages in Isaiah and Daniel that suggest messianic notions that have been ascribed to Jesus by Christians, such as his redemptive suffering and his divine birthright, were well within the scope of Jewish messianic expectations. Even Jesus' triumph after death, Boyarin claims, resonates in "the echo chamber of a Jewish soundscape of the first century." In any case, whether the Messiah was to be the harbinger of God's redemption of the world, *God's anointed*, or the agent of that redemption, *the savior*, the word messiah carried more than its share of meaning for Israel living in the shadow of Rome.

So, exactly what Simon Peter means when he calls Jesus "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is anybody's guess. Jesus calls him blessed, not because Simon recognizes that Jesus is the messiah. In fact, he doesn't. Jesus says, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you." In other words, Simon did not figure this out on his own; rather it was revealed to him by Jesus' Father in heaven. We may have discovered a tenth beatitude here. "Blessed are they to whom God has revealed who the Messiah is.” God may have revealed who wears the name tag, but what that means and what response it calls us to make doesn’t seem to come in the package. It could be that tenth beatitude is a mixed blessing.

Late twentieth century philosopher, Jacques Derrida relates the mystery of the sacred to responsibility. Mind you, Derrida, is not speaking of responsibility in the sense of doing what we are obligated to do after which we can go and do whatever we like. He is speaking of an impossible responsibility in that we cannot dutifully respond to every call our lives present us. In fact, being responsible to one call often means being irresponsible to another. As a broad example, we cannot fully obey, “Thou shalt not kill,” without in a sense, killing ourselves because our part in the food chain requires that we kill and eat, be they animals or plants, to stay alive. Responsibility, or I should say, that to which or to whom we are ultimately responsible, ends up coded in a secret language that often even we cannot ourselves read, not that we actually ever try.

Derrida warns against “an experience of the sacred as an enthusiasm or fervor for fusion, cautioning in particular against a form of demonic rapture that has as its effect, and often as its first intention, the removal of responsibility, the loss of the sense or consciousness of responsibility.”

Our collective human history bears testimony over and over to our conclusion, once we get a truly worthy vision, that any means justify such noble ends. Jefferson’s statement that all men (assuming he meant all people) are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights is clearly as sacred a vision as any ever conceived. It is so great that, for Jefferson and many of the founding fathers, it justified any means to establish it, even if those means directly violated that vision. I am of course speaking of the economies of slavery, of extraction, of militarism, not to mention the violence dealt to the original inhabitants of this land to establish such a fine ideal.

There are countless examples: the violence done to children and families to secure to our national borders, the illness and death reserved for our marginalized sisters and brothers to preserve the health of the medical industry, the imprisonment of millions, disproportionally Black, in service to something we claim to call justice. Dare I say it? Both camps, in equal measure, on the abortion debate. Maybe on both sides of every debate, or what counts for debate these days. Virtually all the violence done in this world stems from the demonic rapture of a sacred dream.

I think in Jesus’ prohibition of calling him the messiah, perhaps he was trying to cast out the demon rapture of the divine dream, the demonic assumption that our Messiah invests divine authority in our personal agenda, or, if you will, the “me” in Messiah. Perhaps that is why Jesus uses the exact same expression on Simon Peter that he used on Satan after the wilderness temptation following Simon Peter’s rebuke when Jesus predicts his own crucifixion. “Depart, Satan!,” he says. The question we as Christians, as a people named for messianic expectation and fulfillment, need to ask, some two thousand years after Jesus' attempted exorcism, is, "Was he successful?"

The problem is that once we name the Messiah, whether it be person or idea, our Messiah absolves us of personal responsibility, as if forgiveness of past and future sins frees us from our responsibility for their consequences. Suddenly we are just carrying out orders, albeit, orders of our own making. Naming the Messiah is tricky business. Ascribing divine authority to a person, to an institution or ideology, to a nation, government or political party and absolution of responsibility to ourselves is rarely "good news" for anyone, and often ends up with someone getting crucified. It is a very different story, however, for those crying for salvation in exile, for those gasping for air with the yoke of oppression pressing down on their necks.

Jesus said, "If you want to follow me, take up your cross." The only other person in the Bible who carried a cross was Simon, not Simon Peter, but Simon the Cyrene, an African man coming in from the country, as Mark and Luke tell it, who was forced to help Jesus carry his cross. It is a great sin, perhaps unforgivable until it is fixed, that we do not hear the cries of "I can't breathe" until after someone dies, as if the cost of a cry for salvation being heard was being heard too late. Yet it is possible that in such a death, Jesus' Father in heaven is revealing the Messiah to us, not that George Floyd was or is the messiah, not that he was blameless, though in his guilt he did not deserve to die, and most certainly not because he was resurrected, because he is dead and will be mourned by his family, by his community, by all who cherish life for as long as memory endures.

It is often said that Jesus' prohibition of calling him Messiah expired upon his death and resurrection. The reason given is that his death and resurrection was proof that he was in fact the Messiah. For most of its history, the church has ascribed divine authority to its now invisible founder, and absolved itself of responsibility for its actions in his name, among the most violent and frankly evil in human history. May God save us from such sacred visions that require the suffering and death of any part of God's creation. May we reject any gospel that is good news for us, but bad news for anyone else.

Perhaps now, if we have license to name Jesus "Messiah," to say the words "Jesus Christ," it is only because we have refused to abandon our responsibility as we seek to do his will, it is only because we have refused his forgiveness for our sins until we have lived and died trying to fix them. Perhaps there is a "me" in Messiah. If so, the Messiah is here . . . and always has been.