

Natalie W. Bell  
 March 22, 2026  
 Fifth Sunday Lent

***Who Do You Say I Am?  
 Matthew 16:13-20***

*<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup> And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup> He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,<sup>[e]</sup> the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter,<sup>[d]</sup> and on this rock<sup>[e]</sup> I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was<sup>[f]</sup> the Messiah.<sup>[g]</sup>*

***Has anyone ever asked you a QUESTION that changed your life?***

Or that you'll ***never forget?***

In the summer before my senior year in high school,  
 I went to a Christian artists camp in Estes Park, Colorado with kids from youth and  
 our youth minister.  
 It was a transformative experience.

***I met people from all over the world.***

One of my best friends was a young man named Akin, from Nigeria.  
 He asked me at dinner one night ‘So, what are you going to do, for God?’  
 And I heard myself say: “***I want to tell people about Jesus***”.  
 It was a ***pivotal*** moment, my call to ministry began right then and there.  
 I went home, turned down a scholarship the state school to study business,  
 and went to the University of Tulsa to start getting scholarships there,  
 because they had a great religion dept!

In this part of Matthew,  
 Jesus is moving towards the end of his ministry.  
 This part of Matthew ***is a turning point.***

It's *central* to the Gospel, central to the *disciples*,  
Central to *our faith today*.

*And it all starts with a simple question.*

Jesus asks his disciples what people *in the community think* of him:

***“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”***

Their response is typical—they want to *fit Jesus into a box*,

As a prophet, or an ancestor in faith, someone powerful, and important.

*This would be kind of like someone today saying*

Martin Luther says this, John Calvin says this, and Barth says something different.

Or, the Presbyterians have this answer,

and the Methodists say something different, and the Baptists yet another thought.

*Then Jesus turns the question to them, directly.*

***“But who do YOU say that I am?”***

Talk about a life-changing question,

and one they will never forget.

It's a turning point.

Jesus wants to know *Who Am I to YOU?*

Can you see past the different opinions and what others have said,

and *see me, yourself?*

*Peter, in typical Peter fashion, answers immediately:*

***“You are the Messiah,<sup>[d]</sup> the Son of the living God.”***

And he's absolutely right!

And Jesus affirms his answer with a *blessing*:

***“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter,<sup>[d]</sup> and on this rock<sup>[e]</sup> I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”***

*This answer and blessing are the basis of so much theology,*

Especially that around priestly succession in the Catholic church.

The church, many believe, is *built upon Peter and his faith*—right here!

But is it all about him? Or is the church built upon his testimony?

Is it more important that Peter answered, or *what Peter said?*

The church is certainly *the body of Christ* on earth today,  
And how we see the Kingdom of God in the flesh.

*But the passage is as much about the QUESTION, as it is the answer.*

Jesus question: *Who do YOU say I am?*

Is the most *important and personal* question in Scripture.

It is the MOST important question in our faith Jesus today.

*Who do YOU say that Jesus is?*

Who is Jesus---*TO YOU?*

*I've always kind of wondered what the disciples were thinking*

At this moment, with Jesus' question.

Did they stare at their sandals?

Did they wonder--Is he who I thought he was?

Who is he?

And Peter—well, he doesn't even think, *he just speaks!*

*And what was JESUS thinking in all of this?*

Do they actually know me?

Will they confess my identity?

Taking a risk to speak out, no matter the cost?

*Peter has the right answer, but ONE verse later,*

*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem*

*and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes  
and be killed and on the third day be raised.*

*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying,*

***“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”***

*But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!*

*You are a hindrance to me,*

*for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Then we all know what happens after the Garden of Gethsemane,

When Jesus is arrested.

Peter denies even knowing Jesus—*not once, or twice, but THREE times!*

Could it be that we are *NOT meant to know the full answer?*

Could it be that we are *meant to live into the QUESTION---*

to journey with Jesus  
as we learn who he IS, and who he is to US?

Debie Thomas, who writes for *Journey with Jesus*,  
***Imagines Peter's thoughts as he answers:***

*You, Jesus, are the one who found me in a fishing **boat**  
and gave me a new vocation.  
You're the one who **healed** my mother-in-law.  
You're the one who said, "Yes, **walk on water.**"  
You're the one who caught me before I drowned.  
You're the one who glowed on a **mountaintop** while I babbled nonsense.  
You're the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame.  
You're the one who told me — accurately — that I'd be a coward on the very night  
you needed me to be brave.  
You're the one **I denied** three times to save my skin.  
You're the one who looked into my eyes with pain and pity when the cock  
crowed. You're the one who **fed me** breakfast on a beach  
and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation.  
You're the one who gave me the courage  
to **preach** to three thousand people on Pentecost.  
You're the one who taught me that I must not call unclean  
what you have pronounced clean.  
You are the one who stayed by my side through insults, beatings, and  
imprisonments. You are the one I followed into martyrdom.  
**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."***

Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus*, April 16, 2020.

***How do YOU live into the question of who Jesus is?***

Who is he, **to YOU?**

Who has Jesus been in your **past?**

How has he rescued you? Sustained you? Comforted you?

***And who is he RIGHT NOW in your life?***

What is he teaching you?

And saying to you?

Who do you hope from him in the **future?**

Thomas asks: *aren't these the questions that we LIVE INTO, over a lifetime?*

Cara Chacko and I just finished *a great CONFIRMATION class*  
with 5 amazing students.

They learned the basics of faith,  
Our Presbyterian heritage,  
The Lord's Prayer,  
And the Apostle's Creed.

And at the end of their studies,  
They will meet with the Elders on Session,  
and share their *own personal statements of faith*.

They write their beliefs, modeled on *The Apostle's Creed*,  
With a part about God the Creator, Jesus the Savior, the Holy Spirit,  
And the church.

And the confirmands are reminded that to join a Presbyterian church,  
There *is only ONE QUESTION they must answer*,  
One thing they must know for themselves.

*Who is Your Lord and Savior?*

And the answer is: *Jesus Christ*.

*I remind them that confirmation is NOT THE END of their faith journey.*  
and now they know everything about Jesus.

Instead, confirmation is like *a ramp, a beginning of their journey*,  
To make their faith in Jesus their own,  
As a member of the church.

I tell them that they will continue having many more questions,  
And living into the answers.

*We should all ask ourselves: Who is Jesus?*

I wonder, how do *YOU answer that question?*

Are there stories you inherited?

What might you need to let go of?

What assumptions have you made?

*Who is Jesus?*

*It's the main question that people ask throughout the Gospels---*

The Pharisees and scribes want to know,

The disciples and followers want to know,

The sick, the sinners, the outcasts want to know,  
Even Jesus own family wants to know....

*And Jesus gives some answers, again and again.*

Jesus says twice “I desire mercy not sacrifice....”

In other words, his ministry is about compassion.

*In Matthew 11 John the Baptist hears about Jesus’ work,*

And sends his disciples to Jesus

*And they ask Jesus;*

**“Are YOU THE ONE who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”**

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:*

<sup>5</sup> *the **blind** receive sight, the **lame** walk,*

*lepers are cleansed, the **deaf** hear, the **dead** are raised,*

*and the **poor** have good news brought to them.*

<sup>6</sup> *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”*

***THAT’S how Jesus defines himself---***

As a man of ***compassion and love.***

Not any big and fancy religious terminology.

Not any Jewish theology.

Just a reminder of ***what he’s been doing—the lives he has restored.***

*the blind receive sight, the lame walk,*

*lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,*

*and the poor have good news brought to them.*

***In other words, knowing Jesus,***

***Is all about what he’s doing in our lives.***

THAT’S more important than all the ***creeds and theology*** in the world.

Through Jesus, God is at work.

***Where is he at work in YOUR life?***

Friends, as we move into Holy Week,

We are all asked to answer Jesus’ question:

***Who do YOU say I am?***

***Let’s take some time to LIVE INTO the answer.***

*Hear the Good News of the Gospel, friends.*

Jesus IS the **Messiah, the Son** of the Living God,

And **OUR Savior.**

**YOUR** Savior.

*May you receive that truth,*

and *share* some of your faith,

with someone who might need to hear about Jesus' love.

And for the gift of the Messiah, all God's people said, Amen.