

The title of the cantata this morning, ‘Who Do You Say that I Am?’, is based on a question Jesus posed to his disciples. Three of the four gospels -- Matthew, Mark, and Luke -- all include a moment where Jesus asks his followers: “Who do you say that I am?” Our scripture is Matthew 16:13-20.

Over the past several weeks, in a series called “Gone Fishing,” I’ve been preaching on gospel stories about Jesus and fish. One of the things we noted is that a fisherman, Simon-Peter, is among the most prominent -- if not the most prominent -- of Jesus’ disciples. One reason he’s so prominent in the gospel’s is his response when Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?”

Clearly, people are saying various things about Jesus, trying to understand what’s going on in their encounters with him, identifying him with one great prophet or another who has come back to life. But when Jesus asks Peter, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” And this has become one of the greatest Christological affirmations of the church... From the lips of a fisherman.

I certainly don’t want to take time this morning to share all we need to know in order to interpret this incredibly rich passage of scripture. But it does matter that this story occurs in a district called Caesarea Philippi, where pagans come to worship at a shrine to the Greek god, Pan. It also matters that Jesus uses the term “gates of Hades” at a place where there’s a huge cave where many believed that gods such as Baal, would enter and leave ‘the underworld.’ And it matters that Jesus confers upon his followers the power to ‘bind and loose.’ All of these things, and more, matter very much if we are to fully understand this story.

But for today, let’s just focus on this Jewish fisherman: Simon-Peter.

Back in the time of Jesus, Jewish children would begin to learn the Torah at the age of 6. Their first level of education would’ve been in a local synagogue taught by a local rabbi. From ages 6 to 10, these students would work to memorize the Torah, the first 5 books of the Hebrew scripture, by heart. Memorization was critical as they didn’t have either Google or Kindle’s back then. (Though we’re focusing on Simon-Peter, not Jesus, it seems Jesus was pretty good at memorizing scripture...)

By age 10, some students would demonstrate a natural ability and distance themselves from their peers. These students went onto the next level of education, which would last until a student was 14 or 15. Students who were less adept did not continue their education and would begin to focus on learning the family trade... like, how to fish.

There was yet another level of education for students at around age 15. These gifted ones would present themselves to a rabbi, asking to become a disciple. If the rabbi agreed, the rabbi would say, “Come, follow me.” (Does that sound at all familiar?)

So why was Simon-Peter fishing that day when Jesus walked by and said, “Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men”? Most likely, because he’d not made it beyond the first level of education. Neither he nor his brother were capable enough as students of Torah, and so they’d gone to apprentice in the family trade. Simon-Peter and his brother are fishermen because they weren’t good enough to be disciples of any rabbi.

And then along comes a rabbi, Jesus bar Joseph, who says: “Come, follow me.” Can you imagine what that might mean to a Jewish boy who was long ago deemed ‘not good enough’?

Please ponder that. The disciples Jesus called to his side were those who were not good enough (and they smelled like fish to boot!). And so I find myself asking, who today are those who are not “good enough”? Because I think these are ones Jesus believes he can use to build God’s kingdom, these are the ones to whom Jesus hands over the keys of Heaven, and these are the ones against whom the gates of Hades will never prevail! Not the most gifted students, but the not good enoughs.

In her book, *Accidental Saints, Finding God in All the Wrong People*, Nadia Bolz-Weber observes: “Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him.” Sometimes, when looking down on those I deem ‘not good enoughs’ I find that disturbing. Other times, when I have a more accurate self-assessment, I find that comforting. Amen.