

Sermon Pentecost 11
Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Matthew 16:13-20
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Genesis, the first book of the Bible, ends with Jacob and his family of 70 people and all their herds moving from Canaan to some very choice real estate in a section of Egypt called Goshen. You'll remember from last week that this was due to a severe drought in the land. Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, had risen to prominence in Egypt, and with the Pharaoh's blessing, insisted his father join him in Egypt where food was plentiful.

Exodus, the second book of the Bible, begins some 200 years later. The Israelite people or Hebrews, as they are called, have flourished in Egypt to the point where a new Pharaoh, who no longer remembered Joseph, felt threatened by their growth and prosperity.

This story of the persecution of the Jewish people will be repeated throughout their history most notably by Adolf Hitler in the 20th century. And it continues in many parts of the world today. But it hasn't just happened to the Jews. Fear of others who are different can cause otherwise good people to act with irrational cruelty. I can't help but wonder if the immigration debate in this country isn't grounded at some level upon a fear that Latinos may one day outnumber Caucasians in the United States.

This Pharaoh, who knew not Joseph, only brings future problems upon himself, his family and his nation by treating the Hebrews in his land harshly. A future hero is singled out as a result of the hardships, however. A 3-month-old Jewish baby is placed in a basket and floated down the Nile under a watchful eye to escape death. Whether by plan, chance or God's providence, Pharaoh's daughter recovers the infant, takes a liking to him and arranges for him to be nursed and weaned by his own biological mother. Afterwards, she adopts him as her own son. She names him Moses, which is an Egyptian name meaning "is born." I don't suppose she knew that when this child became a man, he would be God's agent to give birth to the Jewish people and their new faith.

Some Christian scholars think that what would become the new Christian faith was not started in a manger in Bethlehem, nor in the waters of the Jordan River, but in Caesarea Philippi when Peter confesses Jesus of Nazareth to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." "Mashiach," the Hebrew word for "anointed one," is interchangeable with the Greek version of "Christos" or Christ.

When Peter said that Jesus was the Son of God, it is important to note that he wasn't thinking "second person of the Trinity." That theological development is still a long way off. "Son of

God” was a familiar Jewish title for the long awaited one, sent by God to establish God’s reign on earth.

The Messiah or Son of God would set the Jewish people free from oppressors like Rome, and all the other nations of the world would come to see that the Jews with their one God monotheism had it right all along. We might say Jesus was the new, improved Moses.

Jesus had taken his disciples to the northernmost border of Israel away from the crowds, to pop the first of two questions: “Who do the people say that I am?” John the Baptist, the firebrand, calling for repentance and God’s return, Elijah, the miracle worker, and Jeremiah, the prophet who took on the power brokers in his day, are all reasonable answers. Jesus, as the disciples have witnessed firsthand, however, is all of these and more.

Then he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Of course, this is the more important question. And Peter hits the nail on the head without any comprehension of how God’s messiah will accomplish the Father’s will. They will soon hear about his suffering, arrest and death, and when they do, they – especially Peter – won’t like it. That is why Jesus tells them not to tell others. The disciples themselves won’t figure out the final events of Jesus’ life until after the resurrection.

I’d like to suggest this morning that sometime soon in a quiet moment, far from the distractions of the TV, computer or a hand held device, you consider a question or two. You might ask a trusted friend, spouse, sibling, parent or child, “Who do you say that I am?” How does one or more of these people who know us well see us? Do they perceive me the same way I perceive myself? Will they describe in all honesty the person I hope I am and I am trying to be? Will they use adjectives like honest, sincere, caring, kind-hearted, thoughtful, reliable, helpful and generous?

Jesus took a chance when he asked his disciples who they thought he was. Are we willing to take that chance to be more assured that we are living in the right direction and making progress in the way of Jesus, the holy way?

A second question we might ask that will take courage and quiet and imagination is for Jesus - “Jesus, who do you say that I am?” This is more like prayer except we need to listen in our hearts. How would Jesus describe us?

The results of this avenue of questioning are going to first depend on who we say and believe Jesus is. If we think Jesus is a strict taskmaster who demands excellence and perfection or else, the answer may be one thing. If we think Jesus is distant, ineffectual or unconcerned about our plight, we probably won’t ask for his opinion in the first place. If we think Jesus is our Lord and Savior because he invested himself in the human condition and lived a radically different life of

love, respect and justice for every person, then the answer to our question may be something else again.

I want to conclude today with a story from a book of religious humor. It includes St. Peter standing at the gates of heaven because in Matthew's gospel, as we heard, Jesus gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. More than making you laugh, however, I hope this story will encourage you to seriously explore the questions I posed earlier knowing that, as the familiar hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" states, "...there is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given..." as up in heaven.

When Roger died and went to heaven, he was met at the front gate by St. Peter, who let him know that he needed one hundred points to get inside the pearly gates. "You tell me all the good things you have done and I'll give you points according to your deeds. When you reach one hundred, I'll swing open the gates of heaven."

Roger began, "Okay, I was head usher at First Baptist for 50 years."

"That's wonderful!" said St. Peter, "that's worth two points."

Roger continued, "I was happily and faithfully married to the same woman for nearly 60 years."

"Terrific!" Peter exclaimed, "You get three more points."

"Only three?" Roger questioned. "Well, how about this? I started a soup kitchen in the inner city and worked in a homeless shelter."

"Fantastic! Three more points," St. Peter declared.

Roger's eyes opened wide in disbelief, and he exclaimed, "Three more points! At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

At that, the gates swung open and St. Peter said, "Come on in." AMEN.