

I

Who do people say that I am?

To the kids on the playground at the Greenwood Forest Elementary School, I was “Big Cockroach.” I have no idea how or why I received that nickname, but apparently, to them, that’s who I was.

To my seventh-grade football coach, I was Jethro. The actor who played the character Jethro on the 60’s sit-com *The Beverly Hillbillies* was a man named Max Baer, and my football coach thought the nickname he had assigned me was terribly clever.

Just before I began my first call as a pastor, the chair of the pulpit committee called with a question. He said, “What do you want us to call you?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Do you want us to call you Reverend Baer, Pastor Ryan, or what?”

To my three sons, I’m just “Dad.”

II

Who do people say that you are? All of us wear many different hats and are called by different names and different titles, depending upon the context and the company.

Establishing our identity is a huge part of the world in which we live and move and have our being. Most of us who are over the age of 16 at this very moment have within arms’ reach a little piece of plastic called our drivers’ license, or sometimes we simply call it our ID. Of course there is more to us

that the information contained on that little piece of plastic, but we almost never leave home without it in our pocket or purse.

Who do people say that you are? What’s your identity? What’s your purpose? Who are you? What are you about, and where are you going?

Whether we’re aware of it or not those kinds of big identity questions are almost always at work in our world. And those same big questions are at the heart of the story before us today in Luke’s gospel.

III

This winter, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the gospel of Luke. And in these first several chapters, as Jesus has been born, as he has come of age, as he has been baptized, as he has begun his public ministry of preaching and teaching and healing, the people who have encountered him have been trying to figure out exactly who he is, and what he’s all about.

And that leads us to our story today, a series of stories about his identity. So listen now for a Word from God from Luke 9:18-36.

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” He said to them, “But who

do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with

him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Who do people say that I am? By this point in Jesus’ ministry, word had begun to spread about him all over Galilee, into Judea, and beyond. And so Jesus asks his disciples a simple question – “Who do people say that I am? What’s the word on the street?”

And the disciples dutifully report what they have heard. Some say that you and John the Baptist are one and the same. And others say that you’re Elijah or one of the prophets of old.

And Jesus listens, and it’s quiet for a moment. And then he raises the stakes. He takes the conversation from the general to the personal. He says, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

And Peter considers all that he has seen and heard from Jesus up to this point. He remembers that day when Jesus told him to put out into the deep water and to let down his nets for a

catch, and how the boat was so full of fish that it was in danger of sinking. He remembers the centurion in his hometown of Capernaum and the widow of Nain, how Jesus healed sickness and even raised a dead man to life again with just a word. He remembers all of Jesus' profound teaching about the things in life that truly matter. And he comes to a conclusion.

"You are the Messiah of God," Peter says.

Messiah was and is a loaded title. Remember, for nearly 1,000 years, the Land of Promise had been ruled by foreign empires. Not since the days of King David had the Land of Promise been anything approximating an independent nation. The Hebrew scriptures foretold of this Messiah, this descendent of King David, this one who would restore the kingdom and rule over Israel forever.

Not for nothing, the Greek word for Messiah is Christ. This is a true story. For the longest time, I thought Christ was Jesus' last name, and his parents were Joseph and Mary Christ. It wasn't until much, much later that I learned that Christ is not a last name, but a title. In fact, the literal translation is Jesus *the* Christ.

Who do *you* say that I am? Peter gave the correct answer. You are the Messiah of God.

But before Peter or the disciples could say anything else, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone else about it, and

then he began telling them about how he was to undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and killed, and on the third day be raised again.

And then Jesus told them that if anyone wants to be his followers, his is a program of self-denial and cross-bearing. His is a program of making a decision not just once, but every single day, to follow him. Jesus told them that anyone who is in his movement for their own glory, for their own self, is in the wrong place. Anyone looking to save their own life will lose it, but anyone willing to lose their life for his sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.

Who do *you* say that I am?

Eight days later, Peter, James, and John got another answer to that question while with Jesus high up on a mountainside, when Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes and face became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah are there talking with him. It's a strange story, and this time, Peter didn't have just the right words at just the right moment. But while he was fumbling, a voice interrupted him. "This is my Son; my Chosen; listen to him!"

IV

Who do people say that you are, my friend? I imagine that that question varies wildly depending on the context and the company. You are many different things to many different people.

And some of the identities that people assign to you might be titles of honor and love. And some of the identities that people assign to you, for any number of reasons, might be hurtful or hateful or just plain mean.

But the more important identity question for you, my friend, is this – who does God say that you are?

And here's what I believe in my heart of hearts. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth means that you are God's Chosen. You are loved. You are cherished. You are worthy.

Not because you got the right answer. Not because you said the right prayer. Not because you've got it all figured out.

You are loved. You are cherished. You are worthy.

Not because you voted for the right candidate. Not because you graduated from the right school. Not because of any of the data about you contained on your drivers' license.

You are loved. You are cherished. You are worthy, because of who God is, and because of what God has done for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Nothing more, and nothing less.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is, my friend? Who is he to you, personally?

Those are not light questions to be sure. And you and I both know that

people have lots of things to say about who he is.

Some people say Jesus was an interesting historical figure and a great moral philosopher of antiquity, something akin to Socrates or Confucius.

Some say that Jesus was a prophet, in the tradition of Elijah and Mohammad.

Some say that Jesus was a radical revolutionary who took on the powers that be and got himself executed by the state for his trouble.

Lots of people have lots of things to say about who they think Jesus is. But who do *you* say that he is?

Historical figures and moral philosophers and prophets and earthly leaders have come and gone, and they will come and go.

But I am convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ – the Messiah – the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet. I am convinced that Jesus is the Messiah of God – the one who was and is and is to come. I am convinced that there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor anything else in all creation that can separate you or anyone else from the love of God poured out in him.

Moral philosophers and historical figures and earthly leaders have their place. But there can only be one

Messiah. There can be only one Lord.
There can be only one who is worthy of
your total and complete devotion. Who
do you say that he is?

V

And what about us, as a
community of faith? Who do *we* say
that he is?

We Presbyterians are known for
being a wordy bunch of Christians. The
Constitution of our church is so long it
comes in a two-volume set. In our way
of being the church, as we listen for the
voice of Christ for his church, decisions
are made in community, oftentimes
after long conversations with one
another.

Like Peter, sometimes we get it
exactly right. And like Peter, sometimes
we stumble over our words.

But thanks be to God, whether we
get it right, or whether we get it wrong,
God reminds us over and over and over
again about who and whose we are.
Thanks be to God, God reminds us over
and repeatedly about who God is, and
what God promises, and what God
expects of us. Thanks be to God, over
and over and over again, amidst all of
our words, in the midst of all of our
confusion, comes a voice that says, "This
is my Son, my Chosen! Listen to him!"

May we have ears to hear, and
may we have the courage to pick up our
crosses and follow, this day and every
day. Amen.