

August 21, 2011 Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

INTRO: I love the part of the story of Moses' birth where the new King of Egypt who had come to power, after having ordered that all the boy babies of the Hebrews were to be executed, finds out that the midwives respected God too much to obey his order. So the king gathers them together and asks some questions. (As an aside, watch for the questions when we read the Bible, and we'll usually be drawn into the deeper reflections.) The king asks the midwives : "Why are **you** doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?" (To be fair, I don't know the tone of voice from the king when asking those questions, but I have to suspect a little incredulity toward the midwives.)

I like that part of the story because of all the irony to be found there. The most powerful person in the nation, threatened by the new born babies of an enslaved people, out-manuevered by a group of midwives, eventually thwarted by his own daughter's compassionate response toward Moses... and here he is in this part of the story- incredulous and asking why he is not being obeyed.

If we read through the Bible with hearts open to receiving it, there will always be much irony to be found, when it comes to God's kingdom showing up in the world. And it almost always includes the insiders who have the greater power, being threatened by someone who is less powerful in every way except one: the ones who are in opposition to the world's power, live in a way is more in step with the kingdom God values, instead of the values of the kingdoms of the world- And that is always a powerful thing. We see a little of that in this story about the birth of Moses and some of the key characters in it.

1. Did you notice that the gospel story about Jesus and the disciples that day near the town of Caesarea Philippi, began with Jesus asking them a certain question?
2. Jesus special conversation with his disciples began with sort of an ice-breaker question. "Tell me... who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ("Son of Man" is how Jesus most of all refers to himself in the gospel stories.) But this feels like sort of an ice-breaker question to get a discussion going. And his disciples all seem to jump in by sharing the things they've been hearing people say. Some are saying that Jesus is John the Baptist, or one of the ancient prophets... all of whom by now are dead and gone- but Jesus is so much known to be showing the power and presence of God through the things he is saying and showing that people have been talking. And while no one is really sure how to understand what Jesus is all about, or who he is even, everyone seems to sense in him something so spiritually real and powerful that they can't help but think of him like they think of some of the key figures of faith in recent times (in the case of John the Baptist) or through eons of time (in the case of the ancient faith leaders).
3. But then the question went deeper. "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Peter's response, as much as Jesus' question, might invite our own response. "You are the son of the Living God" Peter (who was still called Simon up to then) answers. And Jesus announces how Peter has been blessed by how God opened him up to perceiving such a thing. He changes his name to Peter, or "Rock", and then declares to him that he is being given the "keys to the kingdom of Heaven".
4. Part of the response in us that this can invite, might include our own questions. First:

Who do I say that Jesus is? But additionally: Do we really want the “keys” to the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus brings? Especially when we think about some of the key things Jesus has taught and showed about the kind of kingdom he is interested in (love of enemies, the greatest is the servant of all, the last are the real first... not to mention the contrast from the kinds of kingdoms we are all the more familiar with: might makes right; to the victor go the spoils; me first...

The kind of Kingdom Jesus shows and tells and gives, is a kingdom based on grace and unconditional love beyond what we can ever fully comprehend. It's the kind of kingdom that raises a lot of questions and wondering... No wonder Jesus so often asked such introspective questions about a kind of kingdom that is sometimes hard to define-- but is always recognizable at a certain level, whenever we see it!

5. I'm not the best “itinerating Alaskan clergy” to have ever visited churches outside of Alaska to tell about ministry here, but I did enjoy the experience of visiting the Western NC churches where we spent the first week of our time away.

Some of you know that one of the main reasons that Alaskan pastors speak in churches throughout the U.S. is to raise money for projects we are working on. The speaking engagements are meant to help other churches connect with what we sense God doing in the lives of the Alaskan communities where we serve. Our recent “Itineration” wasn't primarily about that. And I shared with the churches we spoke at that we were mostly there to say “thank you” to a region of NC who have been sending mission teams to Alaska for years to help in all kinds of ways.

You probably won't like it when I tell you about one thing that happened, but I might as well let you know. One of the churches where we spoke received an offering for us to take with us and use in ministry here. But I said: “No offerings! Please feel free to put that contribution toward the next mission trip you are bringing to Alaska, to help with the high costs of travel or whatever.” Now I fully expected that they would insist on us bringing their gift back here, and I knew that I'd know what to do with their money in ministry. But they kept it! See what I mean about me not being really good at this itineration thing!

But after speaking at 5 different churches in 4 days, and showing slides and talking about life and ministry in Alaska, I can tell you this: It was the question-answer time that I found the most meaningful and enjoyable... especially when we talked about ministry in Alaska and ministry in and through the churches we were visiting. Because we found a great deal of common ground about what it means to be a church who is all about the mission of being disciples and inviting others to experience discipleship as followers of Jesus. Our denominational mission statement talks about world-transformation. And we have all come to believe that our connection to God through Jesus is how the world can be wonderfully transformed.

So, some of what we discussed was about inviting, sharing with others in our communities (whether in Homer, Alaska or North Carolina, or anywhere else), what we are experiencing from our God of love and grace... what we are coming to trust and hope for, and live out by faith.

And let me say this, that is no easier in North Carolina than here... the same challenges of speaking the word of transformational grace to those who have heard it

so many times before, or have been turned off by some version of a so-called invitation to discipleship, or who have simply said “thanks, but no thanks”-- seem to exist in every place.

Still, I liked the question-answer times and discussions best, because I felt like it helped to talk these things over with the ones we spoke with at those generous, committed and serving churches where we were visiting.

6. I like ice-breaker questions that begin a study or discussion, but sometimes being left with a question is even more helpful... So I'd like to leave us with some questions by inviting us to consider the kind of difference it can make, were we to hear Jesus' question “Who do you say that I am?” as meaning more: “Who do you show that I am?”
7. Also, what might it mean to us that we are being given Jesus' kind of kingdom? Notice how Peter wasn't even asked if he wanted it... it was given because of Peter's openness to something amazing about Jesus... but I think most of all it was given to Peter just because of something amazing about the grace of God that Jesus shows.
8. I don't know about everyone else, but I wonder sometimes about how God's kingdom is showing up in my life by how I answer a question like: Who do I say that Jesus is? -or- Who do I show that Jesus is? I wonder about how I am answering those questions on a daily basis. There's a lot of room for wondering about that.

I do not, however wonder about how important that must be. I am certain that how we answer Jesus' question with our lives, is a transformational thing when it comes to God's kingdom being given.

Let us pray:

Dear God, I pray for grace in our everyday lives-- grace that is so transformational that our words and our actions bring the most powerful of witnesses to who we say that Jesus is. Not only in ancient times, but this morning here at church... and later today... and at work tomorrow, or at school this week... and in our homes... and in our relationships... and perhaps especially in the quiet of our hearts and minds throughout the day and all through the night. Through Jesus, the Christ, amen.

Let's rise to sing No. 127 is a Hymn that prays for God's guidance in the living of our lives.
“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”