

[editor's note: The Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Easter services included 1st person narratives from the characters involved in the story. Today, Peter, a Pharisee, a bystander, Judas, a religious leader, and Mary the mother of Jesus told their story. Children's Time included a retelling of the story using the Red light/Yellow light/Green light framework.]

I saw it again on the news this week, a reporter putting a microphone in the face of an average joe on the street asking him about whatever was going on. In this case, it was a country in political turmoil (not the US but I suppose that describes our nation also). There had been some incendiary remarks made by a leader and the journalist wanted to know if the people agreed with their leader. This guy was eager to give the reporter a common-man's perspective at the political scene. He began, "People around here are saying..." and he went on in some detail to share what he'd overheard at the coffee shop, and from his neighbors, even from a co-worker... but then the reporter ask "Is that what you believe?" And the guy was silent.

You see it again and again, people willing to tell you what other people think, either what they've heard them say, or perhaps just assumed to be the case, but the stories from Scripture today ask you to consider, "What do you believe?" –To imagine you're on the streets of Jerusalem when a dude on a donkey rides over and asks "Who do you say that I am?"

Am I a disciple serving the Lord—willing to fulfill his requests however strange? –like, go into the city and untie a donkey, or let me wash your feet, or pray with me after a big meal in this dark garden when everyone seems out to get us.

Do you feel like a family member, who wants nothing more than to keep your loved-one safe and yet have come to realize the awful truth, that none of us can ultimately protect the ones we love from harm?

Are you the follower who watches and cringes at the startling actions—turning over the tables in the temple. Or are you a bystander, on the street, watching the parade, the adoration, the worship wondering if their hope is misplaced, if anything good can come from a prophet and a rabbi from so long ago in a land so fraught with political and religious strife.

Are you more like Peter, well meaning and passionate, willing to be the first to speak up and act out, who runs hot but, also cold when threatened, acting more out of fear than faith?

Are you one who is part of the movement for social change, who is fed up with the politics and economics of the empire, who has had enough of oppression and corrupt taxes, who lines the street on behalf of every the social concern and yet is exhausted and despairing when the results don't live up to the vision?

Are you one who appreciates religious tradition and order, who feels fear ripple through the crowd and is worried with the insurrection Jesus brings? Are you the guardian of stability, the voice of compromise who would calm the voices of rebellion and try to manage change at a appropriate pace and through polite dialogue rather than through these showy actions on the streets, or disruptive actions among the assembly of the faithful? Are you one who realizes things need to change but just aren't sure this is the way to go about making the change? Like Judas, do you distrust the timing and methods of the movement?

Perhaps, the reality is that we're not just any one of these characters but many of them, more or less, at certain moments of our lives.... Perhaps that's why Jesus ask the question, "Who do you say that I am?" It is the language of decision more than the language of journey, it's the language of decisive commitment rather than perpetual reflection. Martin Copenhaver (in the book *Questioning Jesus* which we've been using in this series) asks:

Why is that question so difficult [for the disciples] to answer? By this time, the disciples had already traveled many miles with Jesus. They had heard him preach. They had seen the lame walk and blind blink their eyes with new sight after encountering Jesus. Certainly they must have already answered this question in the privacy of their own hearts. Why was it so difficult to give voice to their answer?¹

We may hesitate, Copenhaver says, “not because we doubt the words are true, but because, having spoken the truth, we can no longer ignore its implications for our lives.”

Karl Rahner, a 20th century Jesuit priest, described Jesus as a perfected human being. Anglican Bishop, John A.T. Robinson, called Jesus “the human face of God.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis, focused on Jesus’ call to community calling him “the man for others.” Latin American theologians exalt Jesus as the “great liberator,” Jurgen Moltmann “the crucified God.” Jewish scholar Amy Jill Levine finds the historic Jesus as a “Jew who speaks to other Jews” about the kingdom of heaven drawing near. Rosemary Radford Ruether begins with the Jewish understanding of Messiah and proclaims Jesus as the liberating word that disrupts dominance and oppression. American Businessman Bruce Barton claims Jesus is “greatest salesman who ever lived.”²

But no one can answer such a question for another. Those who would be Jesus’ disciples must eventually answer it for themselves. And that requires a place and a time and a people to hear the story and to imagine our part in it. Our gathering here, every Sunday, is such an occasion. It is a moment out of the ordinary rush of the day, a yellow light, a pause. It is what is needed to crossover the threshold of routine life into the reflective life of discipleship.

Poet David Whyte speaks of doors as fearful and exciting, where the old has past away and new has not yet happened.³ They provide a threshold. For me, Palm Sunday is such a threshold, a leaving behind of Lent, of following in Jesus’ footsteps, and a crossing over into the place of decision, of deciding what it is those actions Jesus took the last week of his life will mean for us in our lives. This is the place to consider what we need to crossover into the holiness before us, into its healing, into its challenges, into its characters.

Perhaps that’s why Jesus asks his disciples the question, “Who do *you* say that I am?” So that they, and by extension, we, would have a memory of what our answer is to the question. So that we would have answered “Who am I to you?” when it happens that we no longer believe (for surely that time comes to most)... and it becomes the community of the faithful who believes on our behalf. We will have earlier answered the question . . . when we have dug ourselves so deep into a hole of sin, and we will know there is an opportunity to confess and be freed to live again. Jesus ask the question so we can hear the echo of our answer when life seems crazy busy out of control... and we will know where there is a threshold, a time outside of time that makes all the other moments worthy because we have chosen, we’ve decided to serve the one who offers us life –abundantly.

We decide how to answer the question so that whatever our actions, be they worthy of Christ, or fall somewhat short—be they bold, misguided, or a betrayal, we will know our way back to the one who saves, to the one we know is the Savior of our lives, the one who sacrificed all, for us, to get the message that whatever gulf existed between humanity and the divine has been bridged with a question, not of belief, but of decision. Hear the good news: the question is before us this Holy Week, and we get to decide for ourselves--who Jesus will be for our lives.

1. Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015) “Questions About Who Jesus Is.”
2. Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015) “Questions About Who Jesus Is.” and various internet sources.
3. Visit David Whyte’s website and blog.