

February 25, 2015

Midweek Lent Service

Mark 14:53-65

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Two thousand years ago, people just like us were buzzing and clamoring about a teacher-preacher-healer from a tiny little town in Galilee. This man, Jesus, was smart, charismatic, down-to-earth, and sincere. People were drawn to him. They loved his sermons, and they watched this man perform incredible miracles.

But, at some point, they were all confronted with this outrageous question: Is Jesus the actual Son of God? Jesus was going around telling people that he was indeed God's Son. So all kinds of people -- religious leaders, poor people, rich people, fishermen, tax collectors, men, women, boys, girls -- all of them had to sort it out. Did they really believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the actual Son of God?

Let me introduce you to three men who had to wrestle with that very question. Here's the first, Nicodemus. He's a member of the Jewish national ruling council, a Pharisee. He doesn't want to be seen with Jesus and get in trouble, so he sneaks in to talk to Jesus at night. He says, "*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him*" (John 3:2). Nicodemus is impressed with Jesus. He's convinced that God is with Jesus, and is helping him do his miracles. But does Nicodemus really believe that Jesus is the actual Son of God? Maybe, but we can't be sure. Let's label Nicodemus "impressed, but not yet expressing belief."

Here's the second man, Peter. One of Jesus' hand-picked disciples, he is as close to Jesus as anyone is. One day, Jesus puts Peter and the other disciples on the spot. He asks them, *"Who do you say I am?"* Peter answers, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:15-16). Great answer, right? Peter expresses his belief in Jesus as the Son of God. And, yet, when you read the Gospel stories, you see that Peter continues to struggle to apply his beliefs, in his own daily living. He has a hard time following Jesus' plan, and doing things the way Jesus does them. Peter even ends up denying that he knows Jesus three times, on the night when Jesus was arrested. So let's label Peter "expresses belief, but struggles to apply beliefs in daily living."

Here's our third man, Caiaphas the Jewish High Priest. You heard his story earlier tonight, in the Passion reading. Jesus has been arrested, and he's on trial. There's a whole lot of confusing, contradictory testimony. Then Caiaphas asks Jesus directly, *"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?"* In other words, "Are you the Son of God?" Jesus responds, "I am." The high priest rips his robes in shock and anger, and shouts, *"What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy!"* (Mark 14:61-63). He and the other judges all quickly condemn Jesus to death. Let's label Caiaphas "emphatically refuses to believe."

Is Jesus the actual Son of God? Three men, three reactions.

What about you? Where are you at? Do you really believe that Jesus is the actual Son of God? That he is truly divine? That he is your Lord? Does your reaction to the question of Jesus' divinity parallel any one of these three?

I don't see any high priests sitting here tonight; but I would guess that we all know somebody like Caiaphas, somebody who refuses to accept the divinity of Christ. There are plenty of refuseniks in our world, in our culture, in our circles of friends and acquaintances. What would you say to such a person about Jesus? If God gave you an opportunity to talk to someone who flatly refuses to accept Jesus as God, how might that conversation go? Do you know why you believe in Jesus as the actual Son of God? Could you share it effectively? Winsomely? Politely?

What about our first guy up there? My guess is that there are some Nicodemuses here tonight. Maybe you respect, admire, and even love Jesus; but you're just not convinced, in your heart, that he actually is God. Maybe God was just working through Jesus, and we can all learn a lot from him as a teacher or a role model? To you, I say, respectfully, dig a little deeper. Read a little more, study a little harder, dive in to the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament testimonies. Listen to the next several sermons about Christ here at Hope in the weeks ahead. Like Nicodemus, when you really get to know Jesus, you may just find out that you're getting to know the actual Son of God!

And, finally, our friend Peter. Most of us here tonight, truth be told, are a lot like Peter. We churchgoing Christians say the right words. We recite the Apostles' Creed week after week. We make our Confirmation kids say it from memory. "I believe in God the Father ... and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." We're good at expressing our beliefs, like Peter. The hard part is putting them into practice. Applying our faith to daily living is a real challenge, isn't it? We want to walk with Jesus, follow him, and be his disciples. But we also want to be in control of our own lives. We want to be safe and secure. And we sure don't want anybody coming after us, or hassling us, because we believe in Jesus.

During these days of Lent, we all need to work hard at applying what we believe to our daily life. We need to stand up for Christ, to live for him, to be all in for Jesus. That's what tonight's words from the Apostles' Creed really require. Are you living as if he's actually your God? Is your life showing that Jesus is your Lord? Is your belief in Jesus shaping the person you are, on a day-to-day basis?

It's not about you and me being strong enough, good enough, or faithful enough to walk the walk. It's about letting Christ into our lives, our hearts, our minds. It's about leaning on Christ more than we've been leaning on him. It's about allowing Jesus to guide us, to strengthen us, and to work through us. Isn't that why the Son of God came into this world -- to give his life, to pay for our sins, and to reshape our lives by his forgiveness, love, and grace?

Caiaphas refused him. Nicodemus we're not sure of. But Peter's life, despite his struggles, was forever blessed by the grace of the Savior. Let's stand, and proclaim, with Peter and the faithful of all generations, our belief in Jesus as the actual Son of God. We speak the Apostles' Creed together, as printed in the bulletin.