



“Who do you say that I am?” This is **the most fundamental question** for one who professes him- or herself to be a Christian. There is, ultimately, no getting around the question. We can hem and haw. We can find ways to dodge the question. We can do that wonderful sleight of hand: “what do you think”? Putting the question back to the one who asked us. But at some point, the evasions end.

Each of us must answer the question for ourselves. Your answer, and my answer, may be different. But each of us must **at some point** in our walk as a Christian answer the question. “Who do you say that I am?”

The world is pretty quick to put labels on people. We do it ourselves. At a party, almost the first question after asking someone’s name

is “what do you do?” Where do you live? Who is your family? We categorize each other by title, by profession, by family ties, especially in a small town, and by what the person can do for us.

When we don’t have a label for someone, when we can’t put them into an easy category, we get anxious. We don’t know how to treat them – how to respond to them.

“Oh, you’re a lawyer.” All the assumptions and preconceptions about lawyers come to the fore. Whether the person I’m talking to fits those assumptions and preconceptions doesn’t matter – at least not at first. It’s only over time as I get to know that person that I distinguish between my assumptions and preconceptions and the actual person. Time after time, I’ve had someone say to me, with some astonishment in their voice: “But you’re too nice to be a lawyer!” Maybe those assumptions and preconceptions need some review.

So, it’s not surprising that people in Jesus’ time thought that perhaps he was John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or some other prophet.

After all, Jesus acted a lot like a prophet. He roamed the countryside preaching and teaching. He challenged the authorities of his time- both religious and political. He challenged the norms of the time by eating with outcasts. He called for people to amend their ways to prepare for the coming of God’s realm on earth. Jesus wasn’t content to stay in Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or any of the places close to where he was born or where he grew up and learned the trade of a carpenter. In so many different ways, Jesus simply wasn’t living a life that was expected of a son of a carpenter, the son of poor people, someone living in an occupied land.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus entreated people to amend their ways. To learn to live under God’s teachings and not those of the world. John the Baptist preached repentance – the need to turn

around from a life that was lived in opposition to the ways of God. Jesus gave us the two great commandments- expansions upon those teachings in the Torah.

Like Elijah, Jesus chastised the people for becoming hidebound in their worship. Elijah begged the people of his time to return to worshiping Yahweh. Elijah also found ways for food to multiply-not the feeding of the 5,000 as Jesus did. But a little oil and a little meal – which should have been enough only for a last meal for the widow of Zarephath and her son (1 Kings 17: 8-16). The widow and her son fully expected to die when they finished that bare bones meal, but along comes Elijah. Trusting that Elijah was a prophet of God, the widow turned over the meal and the oil to Elijah, and he made it last “until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth” (1 Kings 17:14). The widow and her son lived through the intervention of a prophet of God.

Fast forward a few hundred years after Elijah and we come to the prophet Jeremiah. Things are not going well for the people. The Babylonian empire is growing in strength and power. Jeremiah urges the people to remember the covenant that was made with God. But as we are also wont to do, we don't remember what it's not convenient to forget. And the people are taken into captivity.

Jesus is preaching a similar message as John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah. Different words and different emphases, perhaps, but fundamentally similar: Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Dt. 6:4-6).

Shiphrah and Puah are two women who take a huge chance. The Pharaoh was so upset that the Hebrew people were multiplying, that he ordered them to kill all the male babies (Ex. 1:15-16). When we act from fear, we often kill – literally or figuratively, that which threatens us. When we are fearful, we tend to shut down emotionally – and it's hard for the love of God to get through.

Shiphrah and Puah had to know that if the Pharaoh found out that they were letting the male babies live, that their lives would be forfeit. But they loved God more than they feared for their lives. And so Moses, a male Hebrew baby, was put into the river and permitted to live. Perhaps Moses was spared because his mother was a Levite- the traditional family that became priests before God. Perhaps the fact that his mother was a Levite has nothing to do with what happened. In any event, Moses was spared and became the one who would lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Small acts. Large consequences.

“In 1963, Edward Lorenz made a presentation to the New York Academy of Sciences and was literally laughed out of the room. His theory, called the butterfly effect, stated that a butterfly could flap its wings and set air molecules in motion that, in turn, would move other air molecules—which would then move additional air molecules—eventually becoming able to influence weather patterns on the other side of the planet. For years this theory remained an interesting myth. In the mid-1990s, however, physics professors from several universities, working in tandem, proved that the butterfly effect was accurate, viable, and worked every time.”¹

¹ <http://www.andyandrews.com/ms/the-butterfly-effect/> August 20, 2011

Andy Andrews recounts this event as the basis for his book The Butterfly Effect: How Your Life Matters (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 2010). And it leads us to our scripture today.

What we do – What we believe-And how we lead our lives matters. We will most likely not know the ultimate effect of our words and our lives upon others- and upon the world. But what we believe- our organizing principles if you will – Determine how we live. Determine our values in things large and small.

For example, do we spend everything that comes into our hands or do we save some and give some to those causes we believe in? Do we say please and thank you to people who have no control over us –to the checker at the grocery store or the Fed Ex driver who leaves a package for us. Do we whine and complain when things don't go our way, making it difficult for people to be around us. Or do we find ways to see light and life and laughter even when times are really, really hard?

Who Jesus is to you – and who Jesus is to me- may be different in some respects. Because our life experiences are different, we may emphasize or understand his life and ministry differently. We may use words differently. We may understand those words differently. Regardless, at some point in each of our lives, we must answer the question Jesus poses to Peter: Who do you say that I am?

And what happens when Peter answers: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16: 16). Out of that answer, Jesus builds the community of believers. Those who care and love each other. The body of Christ.

Paul reminds us that “a body is made up of many parts and each of them has its own use... Each is part of the body of Christ as well as part of one another. God has given us different gifts to us. Prophecy. Teach. Encourage others. Be generous. Be cheerful” (Romans 12:4-8). Each of us is of value to God. Each of us has gifts to be used to build up the realm of God on earth.

What you do this week – how you live your life – matters. Shiphrah and Puah could not have known that their decision not to kill all male Hebrew babies would result in Moses becoming the man who would lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. They did what they understood to be right based upon what they understood God's call on their life.

At some point, God, through Jesus the Christ, calls each of us to decide what the organizing principles of our life will be. God, through the example of Jesus the Christ, shows us what a life dedicated to relationship with God and with each other, can be. No, we will not have all the answers this side of the grave. But we do have in Jesus the best example of a life dedicated to God and to humankind. We have an example of a life that holds fast to the belief that God loves us. We love because God first loved us. Jesus, the son of the living God, calls to us: “Who do you say that I am?” Your answer matters.

In ways large and small, how you answer that question determines how you live your life and how you understand your relationship to God and to every person and creature with which you come in contact. Do not be afraid to answer the question. Do not be afraid when Jesus also says

to you: "Follow me." Follow me into life and light and laughter. Follow me into a life that values others and all of creation. Follow me into a life that never ends. *Amen.*