

## Sermon: Jesus, Our Messiah

In our Gospel reading today, we encounter one of the most important questions in all of scripture, asked by Jesus to his disciples: Who do you say that I am?

It's a crucial question, isn't it? But the answer to this question is, in some ways, the easy part. Who do we say that Jesus is? He is the Messiah, of course. Peter was right about that. We are here because we believe it. We believe that Jesus is God's Son, our Savior, the long-promised Messiah.

That's the easy part. But what does it mean? That's the hard part. What does it mean for Jesus? What does it mean for us?

When you think about it, you can get the answer right about many things, without really knowing what the answer means for you.

And that was the case for Peter in today's gospel reading. He got the question right. Jesus was (and is) the Messiah. But what does that mean?

That's what I want to focus on today. Because I believe that Jesus wants more from us than to simply get the answer right, about who he is. He wants us to live our answer, every day, in every way, just as he did for us.

So, what does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah? Jesus tells Peter and the disciples what it means, right after Peter's great confession. Jesus says this is what it means:

"That I must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."

What is Jesus saying? The Messiah must suffer and die, before being raised from the dead? This is the first time that Jesus has told his disciples this. And it must have come as a complete shock to them. That is the last thing that anyone thought the Messiah would do – suffer and die. The Messiah is supposed to take the throne of David, restore the kingdom of Israel in all its glory. The Messiah is supposed to be very alive, and very powerful. And certainly not supposed to suffer and die.

It's no wonder that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Peter suspected that one of these demons that Jesus had been casting out had got in and possessed him. Why else would Jesus say such crazy things?

So, Peter rebukes Jesus, just like Jesus has been rebuking all those demons, hoping to help Jesus come to his senses and get back to teaching and healing and eventually taking the throne and leading. That is what the Messiah does.

This, of course, is tempting for Jesus. We know that, because he in turn rebukes Peter, and famously says to him, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Satan, the tempter, who tempted Jesus in the wilderness. And who is tempting Jesus here. Take the throne. Overthrow Rome. Restore the kingdom of Israel. You don't have to suffer and die to do that. And what good is it to suffer and die? How is that going to help accomplish your mission?

Yes, this must have been a temptation for Jesus. But Jesus knew that his path had to lead to the cross. It was the only way to save us.

I'm sure we have all questioned, "why" was this the only way for Jesus to do God's will. It's a great mystery, to be sure. But what we do know is that it's true, and we know that because Jesus said it.

That is what it meant to be the Messiah.

But what does all of that mean for us? Well, Jesus tells that, too, in this gospel reading. He calls the crowd together, with the disciples, and says to them, and to us:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

That is what this all means for us. And this, too, is a mystery. But if we are to follow Jesus, our Messiah, there is only one way. We must take up our cross. We must lose our life as we know it, for his sake and for the sake of

the gospel. That is how we will save our life, by putting Jesus first, in everything.

We take the first step. We begin to follow and day by day, little by little, we begin to learn what it means to follow Jesus, to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel, and to gain our lives, and so much more in return.

It's a little like becoming a parent when you think about it. You have no idea what it means. Your whole life changes. It no longer revolves around you. And it's the best thing in the world. You gain so much more, so much more than you could ever have imagined. But only by giving something up.

So, too, with following Jesus. It is the best thing in the world. You gain so much more than you ever could have imagined. But, again, by giving something up. By taking up your cross, whatever that may be for you, and giving up your life as you know it, and following Jesus.

That is what it means for Jesus to be our Messiah, and what it means for us to follow him. But this gospel reading does not quite tell the whole story. Because, as we know, this all happens before Good Friday. I know we aren't in the Lent season of worship, but we still can learn from this lesson at anytime in our lives.

But think of what that meant, that Jesus took up his cross. It means many things, but part of what it means is that God is present with us in our suffering. The cross means nothing if it does not mean that God is with us when we suffer. No matter how bad things get in our life, we can count on the fact that God is with us. And we can count on this because Jesus, the Messiah, the only Son of God, took up his cross for us.

God is here, on our dark days. When we get sick. When our loved ones suffer. When we feel alone. When we struggle to believe and to hope. He is with us. Jesus is with us. We know it because he took up his cross for us. If the cross means nothing else, it means that.

But even that is not quite the end of the story. Because when Jesus told his disciples that he must suffer and die, he also told them that he will rise again, after three days. I think that they missed that little statement. They

didn't ask him about it. Peter rebuked Jesus, tried to convince him not to suffer and die, that it was not necessary. But I think that he must have missed this incredible statement, that after three days he would rise again.

The cross can never be separated from the resurrection. Because the cross always leads to new life. The disciples were not ready to even begin to understand that. But Jesus still told them, because for him they cannot be separated. The cross always leads to new life. There is no death without resurrection.

Jesus did not just come to die for us. He came to overcome death for us. To put an end to this last great enemy. And that is why he can invite us to take up our cross, and promise that when we do, we will live. When we lose our life, we will save it. Because the Messiah lost his life for us, to save us.

That is the good news that gives us the courage to gather today, and every Sunday, to confess our faith in Jesus. Because we know what it means. It means life, new life, for us and for all our world.

We may not know all the details. We don't even know what tomorrow holds for us. But we know who holds tomorrow for us. The one who took up his cross, and died, and after three days, rose again. Our Messiah. The Lord of life. Who died, who is risen, and who promises to come again. Thanks be to God. Amen.