



## The Listening God

Rev. Floyd Thompkins  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
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*Matthew 16:13-20 Revised Standard Version (RSV)*

### *Peter's Declaration about Jesus*

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Eli'jah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, [a] and on this rock [b] I will build my church, and the powers of death [c] shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

### **Not a Revolution, but Fulfillment: Looking at God Looking at Us!**

This is a famous passage of scripture. I suppose that no one who attends church is unaware or unfamiliar with this text. It is most often preached as the founding of the church or at least a proclamation text of the identity of Jesus. But, I ask that we look a little closer at the text with an eye toward innovation.

Matthew is the gospel that says forthrightly that Jesus was not a revolutionary. He was rather one who came to fulfill or further faith and revelation – an innovator. We have supposed that this evolution was in the revelation of God. But, what if what Jesus came to do was far more complex than a singular transaction between heaven and earth? Rather, what Matthew's testament is a witness that faith's relevance is defined as the dialogue between God and us or between heaven and earth.

What if the fact of Jesus, the incarnation, was not God proclaiming God's self to us? Rather it was God listening to us. It was God identifying the divine as a part of the human experience, not apart from it. Jesus was a liberation of the particular faith and tradition to a universal relevance of spirituality. The spectacular difference in this Jesus is that he declares that the pinnacle of biblical faith is not that we believe in God, but that God believes in us.

Fully cognizant of all that we are and fully embracing of all that we can do, God believes in us. We have something to say. God listens to our experiences as we listen to God. The good news is

not that we serve a big God, a powerful God or even a kind God. Rather that we serve a believing God. We serve a listening God. We serve a God that says that we are limited, not by what we believe about God, but what we believe about ourselves.

So, Jesus after the miracle of the feeding of four thousand people and the inclusion of the Canaanite Woman deliberately moves to a land that is not inhabited by the faith of the disciples and asked, “Who do these people say that I, the Son of Man, am?” What do they think of me? What do they know about the son of God after what they have heard?

Religion is the portrait of God sketched from the reputation of those of us who profess to know God. Remember that the Matthew text took pains to point out the location of this conversation. Apparently, many of them answered with the images and notions within their heads and their understanding grounded in the Hebrew scriptures. They called out the cultural and religious heroes of their people. They projected upon that audience what they thought they should have said, not what they thought that they would hear. They were not listening.

When disciples stop listening and hearing those with whom they live, they are not acting incarnationally. When disciples only think of those who surround them as people to be taught, souls to be saved or people to be influenced, they are no longer acting as a disciple of the listening God. They will become purveyors of tradition, defenders of culture and the mean-spirited judges of others.

The church has at times answered as did the disciples. For too long we refused to accept the gifts and callings of women. For too long, we the church arrogantly held that we were superior to others in thought, word and deed. If they simply listened to us and accepted our norms as the truth, the world would be saved. For too long the church made the traditions of race and culture determinative of the validity of the voice and legitimacy of people. For too long the church propagated the status quo of exclusion of sexual minorities and social outcasts as its mission of preservation of the order of things. Indeed, we answered the question, not out of listening to the pain of people and the passion and belief of God, but to the echo chamber of our own voices.

We were imprisoned in the idea of a God who was to be interpreted, rather than experienced. We answered Jesus’ question in the arrogance and self-serving pride and those produced the witness of a small God and diminutive disciples. today many of our brothers and sisters, who share the faith, continue this practice of protecting the status quo and refusing to listen to the voice of the other. They call it fake news and an assault on culture that is masquerading as faith.

So, Jesus, in astonishment asked, “Well, whom do you say that I am?” I am always stunned at the fact that many disciples arrogantly spoke up for others and yet had nothing to say about themselves, even though Jesus had given them the answer. Only Peter answered, not because he had insight, but because he had courage. Every single disciple had the same relationship and therefore revelation as Peter, but only Peter said the courageous thing, “You, Jesus son of Joseph and Child of God, are the Messiah.” Jesus fully human and fully divine, while embracing his duality, had given them the twelve named disciples and the unnamed women, who were with them, the experience of intimacy in relationship.

Flesh and blood alone did not reveal this unto you, but your father, of which I partake as your brother, revealed this unto you. The one who is both the son of God and the son of man caused a fulfillment of their humanity and a revolution in their spirit.

This is the courageous witness of the church. Humanity is more than what you can imagine, and God is less controlling and judgmental than you have ever allowed yourself to believe. God exists in the mystery of love and the courage of justice and sacrifice. The arrogance and the burden of being the answer is lifted from the shoulder of the disciples and they become the witness of a new world of possibilities.

In this duality of existence, God calls the world to never settle for the brokenness or disaster of injustice and pain as the will of God or the best of humanity! This is the key to unlock a new world. Personally, it means that no one needs accept their current pain as their future prophecy. What needs to be preserved is the concept that humanity can and will change and God is listening. No door needs to stay locked and no barrier is insurmountable.

The listening God and the courageous church does not accept what is or ought to be. This is where Matthew will eventually end his gospel with the charge, "Go and be because I am always with you." Our proclamation, boldly asserted, is not the anemic claim of a spirituality that simply makes one calm and balanced in the world, but one that makes us alive with passion that changes the world.

Broken – God repairs! Hurt – God heals! Left out – God includes! Guilty – God forgives! We too, in joining with God, were created to be co-creators of a whole new world.

Now, because I am preaching before seminary presidents and I was taught at Princeton Seminary by the likes of Dr. McMickel and Dr. Beaners they told me to include a quotation or a story that makes the point and lets people know that I have studied, and I am a seminary trained preacher.

Such a story comes from Robert Coles. He wrote about Ruby in his book, *The Spiritual Lives of Children*. She was the child who was in the iconic photograph of the desegregation of the Arkansas school. Ruby is seen as a frail small girl surrounded by policeman holding back a cussing, fussing and violent mob of white supremacists who were emboldened by their governor. What is remarkable about the photograph is that she is looking up with a serene look on her face. Many people projected on to that child a sense that she was praying. But, when Robert Coles asked Ruby, a child that was literally changing the world, what she was looking at, she replied "Looking at God, looking at us! "