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Questions Jesus Asked: Who's There?

(Mark 8:27-38 NRSV) "Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, **"Who do people say that I am?"** 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, **"But who do you say that I am?"** Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

I am sure that every one of us in this room is familiar with "knock-knock" joke.

They all take the same form. "Knock, knock." "Who's there?" And while it may seem an odd place to start a sermon, it occurred to me this week that so much of the story of Jesus, as portrayed in all of gospels, confronts us with is exactly that same question, "*Who's there?*" and with our opportunity to decide who we understand this Jesus to be who is always, in fact, standing there knocking at the door of our lives. It is a pattern you can see time after time in the gospel: Jesus says, in essence, "*Here I am.*" And we say "*Who??*" And Jesus responds, "*that's exactly what **you're** called on to decide. Who do **YOU** say that I am?*" Knock, knock. Who's there. Jesus. But Jesus who? That's

the question that you and I are called on every day of our lives. Let me illustrate the point with a story; a preacher by the name of Charles Hoffacker tells the story of

...a man [who lived] in London during the Second World War. Every night German planes appeared overhead dropping countless bombs on the city below. Buildings burst into flames, sirens wailed incessantly, entire blocks were reduced to rubble. One day this Londoner was sitting in the wreckage of his home. The walls remained, but the roof was gone. The man himself was near despair. His home ruined, his city devastated, his country under attack. These thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. The man opened the door, and was shocked to see a small regal figure. It was the King! King George VI! He was touring the war-damaged neighborhood, and had stopped at that particular house. The startled man welcomed the King of England into what was left of his home.

And, Hoffacker, continues:

Jesus is a king like that. He comes... to the ruin that I [sometimes] am, and knocks firmly on the door of my heart. He comes not once, but often, always knocking on that door. This king comes to me in [both] time of crisis, [and in good times.] He comes Sunday by Sunday, [day by day]....¹

I can imagine that man saying “*Who’s there?*” and the king replying “*It’s George*” and the man in turn saying “*George who?*” And then it is indeed the man’s turn to decide who this George is to him. Does he turn him away, thinking kings would not be out and about in such dangerous times and places? Does he laugh and wonder who was playing such a preposterous joke? Does he simply shut the door of his ruined house on his visitor, and walk back into the wreckage?

Who’s there? Who is it? That’s really the question that our scripture poses today, isn’t it? And the story of King George’s visit to his subject’s ruined house really is, as Hoffacker said, a parable for Jesus’s visiting us. Everyone of us has indeed had those times when the roof of our emotional, or intellectual, or spiritual house just caved in, leaving us standing there in shock and dismay. Maybe it was some shattering news

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<http://arc.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work/000917sr.html>

of a family member or friend that just caved your roof in. Maybe it was a death that was unexpected. Maybe it was a death that was expected – but even deaths that can come, finally, as a blessing leave a big hole, in singer Willie Nelson’s words, “a big achin’ hole in my chest now where my heart was and a hole in the sky....”² Maybe it was a change that you made in your life, or had to make in your life. And even good change – a child’s leaving home to move on to the next phase of life, or a graduation, or any of life’s passages – can nevertheless feel at certain moments like loss, like hurt, like the roof just got blown away indeed.

It is in such moments that Jesus stands before you and me, knocking, stands before us like he stood before Peter and the disciples so long ago saying, “*Who do you say that I am?*” **Who do you say that I am?** “*Knock-knock.*” “*Who’s there?*” “*Jesus*” “*Jesus who?*” Well, **you tell me**, Jesus says: *Who do YOU think I am?* Because you see, Peter got the answer wrong. For did you hear how Jesus responded to Peter when he said that as far as he was concerned Jesus was the Christ? For you see, when we read the rest of the gospel of Mark what we realize is that what Peter meant by his identification of Jesus as the Christ was that Jesus was the angry annointed one, the mighty messiah, the conquering king who would now vanquish Israel’s foes, rout the Romans, and by dint of mighty battle bring in the way things should be and make sure that those who deserved punishment got theirs. That’s what Peter was saying in response to Jesus’ question, “*Who do you say that I am?*”

But Jesus, says, “No, no, no; that’s NOT who I am.” Jesus rebukes Peter -- which must have surprised Peter a great deal. But let’s not be too hard on Peter, for he

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Willie Nelson, "Heartland" www.singulartists.com/artist_w/willie_nelson_lyrics/heartland_lyrics.html

is like us, sometimes, isn't he? For sometimes, indeed, when the roof **our** lives has fallen in, we too can be tempted to **misidentify** Jesus, to say wrong things about God. We too can be tempted to take refuge in a theology that says that God has somehow willed the terrible thing that has happened to us, that God has brought a great sadness into our lives, that it was God, who like a blitz bombing or a midwestern tornado or a hurricane is the one who willed that the house that is our life be de-roofed. **But that would be wrong.** That would be to mistake the grace-filled God who indeed works to bring all the good that is possible out of every evil that occurs with a gratuitous god who somehow harms and hurts us. That's what Paul was saying in the book of Romans when he remarked on all things working together for good. And, as I said two weeks ago, that doesn't mean that everything is therefore good; but it does mean that God is in the midst of everything that happens bringing the good that is possible from it. It means that God is always there, in the person of Jesus, standing at the door, saying *"I'll help you rebuild your roof; I won't leave no matter what; **that's** who I am."*

Or maybe you are not one who has had the whole roof of the life that is your house blown away; maybe it's just that your roof *leaks*. Maybe your roof has a hidden hole in it somewhere that is allowing the insides of your house – your life - to get soaked with things that it shouldn't be soaked with. I've preached on this before, but one of the greatest threats to your and my Christian discipleship, our Christian maturity is the consumerism – sometimes the *obscene* consumerism – that is so much a part of American culture these days, which is in the air we breathe and which can indeed leak through the holes in the roofs of our lives. My wife Barbara pointed out to me a

magazine story of a woman bragging that she felt so much better about her life because she now stored her tea in a specially-crafted tea-container that cost over \$200. One of idolatrous and pernicious and perennial beliefs in our culture is what some have called “prosperity theology.”³ It is the claim that God wants you to be rich. As one devotee put it, *“I think God wants us to be prosperous [so that we will] be happy.”* He goes on to say that if you believe that God wants you to be rich, that will give you a better marriage, better friendships, a better life, and, of course, more money.

Does any of that sort of attitude inadvertently seep into your lives? You may not be tempted by \$200 tea containers, but this “prosperity theology,” this hyper-consumerism, can indeed soak your soul from where it is leaking into your house. And you know what? Such “prosperity theology” simply has it **wrong** about what God wants for us. Pastor Rick Warren, the one who wrote The Purpose Driven Life, says it this way: *“This idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy? There is a word for that: baloney. It’s creating a false idol. You don’t measure your self-worth by your net worth. I can show you millions of faithful followers of Christ who live in poverty.”* Moreover, my friends, let me put this baldly and perhaps surprisingly: It is just plain much too oversimple to say that God wants us to be happy. That’s way too **flimsy**. What God truly wants is for you and I to fulfill our purpose, to add to the good in the world, to take on an evil and make it better, to believe God’s promise of life eternal and to know that God’s

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Cf. e.g., Time Magazine, September 16, 2006, issue. Subscribers to Time can access the story here: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>

promise of life abundant is not measured in dollars.⁴ Sometimes, in fact, we **won't** be "happy," but we can be at **peace**, and we can know the joy of being caught up in something larger than ourselves, something Holy, something good and right and which makes God's world a better world - which is much more rewarding than simply being "happy" and must more lasting than anything money can buy.

And after all, isn't that what Jesus was trying to say to Peter after Peter called Jesus the messiah but completely misunderstood what that meant? *Knock-knock? Who's there?* Well, Peter answered that the Jesus who was knocking was the triumphalist Jesus, the one who had come to lead the mighty armies to violently overthrow what was wrong. The one where might will make right, might will make happiness – the messiah will come and finally we'll all be happy. But Jesus says no, no:

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! ... "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Jesus doesn't stand there at the doors of our sometimes roofless or leaking houses asking us to identify him as the one who brings **mere happiness**. In fact, he tells Peter, he tells us, that sometimes to be a Christian will be to suffer. Being a Christian in fact will make you **unhappy** sometimes! Because Christ's call to say who he is as he stands there knocking is finally a continuing call to be changed, to be transformed, to people who whose lives make even more of a difference, whose lives exhibit and live

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As always when citing this "purpose and promise" trope, I am so grateful to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for this apt and succinct way of making the point!

out God's call for love and justice. And sometimes that can be, my friends, the furthest thing from "happiness" as the world would define it.

To have a "saved" life, a fulfilled life, in the knowledge of God is not necessarily to always have a happy life, and certainly not always to have a "prosperous" life. But it is, my friends, a life that can be overwhelmingly abundant, full of grace and beauty and the peace that passes understanding. We know that because *that* is the Jesus who stands before us, inviting us to recognize who he truly is and what he truly does for you and me and this whole world that He loves.

Knock-knock? Who's there? Thanks be to God, it is our Christ. Amen.