

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

PUT FLESH ON THE WORDS

IN THE GOSPEL TEXTS FOR THE FIRST FEW SUNDAYS AFTER PENTECOST, THE FOCUS WAS ON THE TEACHING AND HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS, BUT STARTING A FEW WEEKS AGO WITH THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000 MEN PLUS WOMEN AND CHILDREN WHERE THE REAL MIRACLE IS THE REVELATION OF JESUS' MISSION TO FEED THE WHOLE WORLD WITH HIS BODY AND BLOOD...TO THE ACCOUNT OF THE DISCIPLES IN THAT STORM-TOSSED BOAT ON THE SEA OF GALILEE WHERE JESUS CALMS BOTH THE STORM AND PETER AND THE DISCIPLES FIRST RECOGNIZE AND WORSHIP JESUS AS THE TRUE SON OF GOD....TO LAST WEEK'S STORY OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN WHO PUSHED JESUS TO CLAIM HIS IDENTITY AS THE MESSIAH OF THE JEWS AND THEREFORE THE MESSIAH OF ALL... TO TODAY'S GOSPEL TEXT - PETER'S CONFESSION: "YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD" - THIS SHIFT TO WHO JESUS HAS BECOME PARAMOUNT FOR MATTHEW. FOR HIM, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT HIS GOSPEL BOLDLY NAME JESUS AS THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD AND THAT THE DISCIPLES KNOW AND CLAIM WHO THEY ARE BECAUSE THEY WILL BE CHARGED WITH ESTABLISHING THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST, ON THIS EARTH. AND ALL THIS IS CRITICAL AND ESSENTIAL AT THIS PLACE IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL BECAUSE THE TRANSFIGURATION EVENT LOOMS CLOSE AND FROM THAT POINT ON JESUS WILL GO DOWN THAT MOUNTAIN TOWARD JERUSALEM WITH HIS EYES AND

HEART FOCUSED ON THE CROSS AND THE DISCIPLES WILL ASSUME A GREATER ROLE.

BUT BACK TO TODAY. JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES HAVE TRAVELED DOWN THE COAST FROM TYRE AND SIDON TO CEASAREA PHILIPPI. IT'S A RATHER INTERESTING PLACE FOR THIS CONVERSATION BETWEEN JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES TO TAKE PLACE, FOR CEASAREA PHILIPPI, YOU SEE, IS THE SEAT OF A STRONG CULT TO THE GREEK GOD PAN. AND AWARENESS OF THAT CULT WORSHIP IS EVERYWHERE. IT'S IN THE MIDST OF ALL THAT PAGANISM THAT JESUS ASKS THE DISCIPLES, "WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THE SON OF MAN IS?"

ALL THE DISCIPLES CHIME IN WITH ANSWERS: "SOME SAY JOHN THE BAPTIST, BUT OTHERS ELIJAH, AND STILL OTHERS JEREMIAH OR ONE OF THE PROPHETS." NOW THESE ARE ALL STRONG MEN OF GOD; ALL MEN SENT FROM GOD. BUT JESUS PUSHES HARDER. "BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" AND IT IS PETER'S CONFESSION THAT MOVES JESUS FROM THAT CATEGORY OF STRONG MEN OF GOD TO HIS RIGHTFUL GOD-GIVEN IDENTITY. "YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD," PETER CONFESSES. AND AS THAT INTERCHANGE BETWEEN PETER AND JESUS CONTINUES, JESUS, THROUGH PETER AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES, ESTABLISHES THE CHURCH AND GIVES THAT CHURCH THE AUTHORITY OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. WE ARE HERE TODAY BECAUSE PETER, THE OTHER DISCIPLES AND DISCIPLES DOWN THROUGH THE AGES HAVE FOLLOWED THROUGH WITH THE COMMISSION JESUS GAVE THAT DAY.

SO, I'M WONDERING, WHAT IF IT WERE POSSIBLE FOR US TO HAVE THAT SAME FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATION WITH JESUS – RIGHT HERE THIS MORNING. SUPPOSE JESUS WERE TO ASK THOSE QUESTIONS OF US, BEGINNING WITH HIS FIRST QUESTION TO THE DISCIPLES THAT DAY. “WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?” HOW WOULD WE ANSWER? THINK ABOUT PEOPLE YOU ENCOUNTER AT WORK OR AT SCHOOL OR IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD – WHAT DO YOU THINK THEY BELIEVE ABOUT WHO JESUS IS? SOME, I'M SURE, WOULD SAY THAT HE IS THE SON OF GOD. OTHERS – A GOOD MAN, DID GOOD THINGS FOR PEOPLE – A HEALER, A TEACHER, A PREACHER, A MORAL PERSON WE ARE TO PATTERN OUR LIVES AFTER. BUT OTHERS - I'M NOT SO SURE, SOMEONE WHO LIVED LONG AGO BUT WHO ISN'T VERY RELEVANT TO LIFE TODAY....SOMEONE WE CAN CALL ON WHEN WE'RE IN TROUBLE BUT NOT RELAYLY IMPORTANT IN MY EVERYDAY LIFE....OR MAYBE EVEN – NO ONE SPECIAL – NOBODY...I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD. I DON'T KNOW. YOU SEE, OUR MODERN DAY CULTURE, JUST LIKE THAT OF CEASAREA PHILIPPI, IS FILLED WITH OUR OWN CULTIC GODS, TOO.

BUT THEN COMES THAT MORE PRESSING SECOND QUESTION. JESUS TURNS TO US AND ASKS, “BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?” WHAT HAPPENS THEN? HOW WOULD WE ANSWER?

WELL, IF WE TAKE A WALK THROUGH OUR WORSHIP SERVICE TODAY, WE FIND THE WORDS THE CHURCH – THE CHURCH BUILT ON JESUS WHO IS THE ROCK OF OUR SALVATION – WE FIND THE WORDS THE CHURCH USES TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION. WE NAME THE HOLY TRINITY – FATHER, SON

AND HOLY SPIRIT – AS WE GATHER TO CONFESS OUR SIN AND SEEK FORGIVENESS. WE SING THE WORDS OF THE KYRIE – LORD, HAVE MERCY AND WE SING OUR HYMN OF GLORY TO THE GOD WHO GRANTS THAT MERCY. WE PROFESS, THROUGH THE WORDS OF THE APOSTLES’ CREED, THAT JESUS IS GOD’S ONLY SON OUR LORD, WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY, SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DIED AND WAS BURIED AND ON THE THRID DAY RAISED FROM THE DEAD. IN THE EUCHARISTIC MEAL WE PARTAKE OF HIS BODY AND BLOOD. WE CALL HIM THE LAMB OF GOD.

WE HAVE WORDS – LOTS OF THEM – TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION – BUT HERE’S THE THING. JUST AS GOD THE FATHER TOOK THE WRITTEN WORDS OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND PUT FLESH ON THEM AND JESUS BECAME THE LIVING WORD – SO, TOO, MUST WE PUT FLESH ON OUR WORDS. OUR WORDS MUST BECOME A LIVING FAITH GROUNDED IN AN ALIVE, ACTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, THE CHRIST, THE MESSIAH WHO CALLS US FROM WORDS TO ACTION – FROM APATHY AND INDIFFERENCE TO FAITHFUL HOLY LIVING.

YOU KNOW, AS WE BEGAN OUR JOURNEY FROM STAFF-LED MINISTRY TO DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRY WE KNEW IT WOULDN’T BE EASY. THAT’S A PARADIGM SHIFT THAT TAKES TIME AND PATIENCE – A SHIFT THAT PRODUCES CHAOS AND CONFUSION... A SHIFT THAT MAKES FOR STRUGGLE AND WEARINESS. CHANGING PARADIGMS ISNT EASY. A FORMER ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP OF THE NC SYNOD WHO HAD SERVED AS AN ADMIRAL IN THE

NAVY TOLD ME AS I CAME ON STAFF TO REMEMBER THAT IT LITERALLY TAKES THREE MILES TO TURN AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER IN THE OCEAN. THAT'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING. WE'VE BEEN TURNING FROM OUR OLD PARADIGM SHIFT TO THE NEW – AND IT LITERALLY WILL TAKE “THOSE THREE MILES.” WE'RE NOT YET THERE – WE STILL HAVE WORK TO DO –BUT TAKE A LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE ON THIS RALLY DAY. – ONLY SIX MONTHS INTO THIS SHIFT. DUE TO THE HARD WORK OF THE COUNCIL AND STAFF, WE NOW, BEGINNING TODAY AND EVERY SUNDAY FROM NOW ON, WE HAVE FAITH FORMATION CLASSES FOR ALL AGES WITH TEACHERS IN PLACE AND STUDENTS SIGNED UP (AND PLENTY OF SPACES IF YOU HAVEN'T SIGNED UP YET) – AND A NURSERY FOR OUR TINIEST ONES. WE HAVE A TWO-YEAR CONFIRMATION DESIGN IN PLACE CENTERED ON LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM AND TAUGHT THROUGH WEEKEND FAITH ALIVE EVENTS AT LUTHERIDGE. TEN OF OUR YOUTH, TWO MOMS AND ETHAN AND I ARE HEADED TO LUTHERIDGE FOR THE FIRST OF THESE ON SEPTEMBER 22ND. ADDITIONAL FAMILY AND YOUTH ACTIVITIES ARE PLANNED FOR THIS CONFIRMATION GROUP AND OTHER YOUTH ALREADY CONFIRMED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. WE HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE MUSIC PROGRAM IN PLACE FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH AND ADULTS. WE HAVE SIX COOKING TEAMS IN PLACE READY TO SERVE MEALS TO US AS WE GATHER ON WEDNESDAY EVENINGS FOR FOOD, FELLOWSHIP AND FAITH FORMATION. WE HAVE SIX MINISTRY TEAMS WITH COUNCIL LIAISONS AND CHAIRS IN PLACE –SOME OF WHICH ARE UP AND RUNNING AND OTHERS

WHO ARE STILL IN THE BUILDING STAGE (AND THERE ARE PLENTY OF SPACES HERE FOR YOU TO SIGN ON AS WELL).

WE ARE, INDEED, PUTTING FLESH ON OUR WORDS HERE AT INCARNATION - AND I SHARE THIS, NOT TO BRAG ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING - BUT TO AFFIRM THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT IS MOVING MIGHTILY AMONG US AND CALLING US AND SHAPING US INTO THE CHURCH - THE PEOPLE - GOD IS CALLING US TO BE.

WE WILL EVER GET IT PERFECT? WILL WE, AS A CONGREGATION OR AS INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THIS CONGREGATION, EVER GET IT PERFECT? NO - BUT THEN NEITHER DID THOSE FIRST DISCIPLES. JUST NEXT WEEK WE WILL HEAR PETER WHO SO BOLDLY PROCLAIMS JESUS AS THE MESSIAH TODAY CHALLENGE JESUS TO DENY WHO HE IS. WE KNOW THEY ALL DOUBTED AND FAILED TIME AND TIME AGAIN - BUT YOU SEE - IT WASN'T ALL ABOUT THEM. IT WAS AND IS ABOUT THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THE HOLY SPRIT, YOU SEE, TAKES WHAT WE OFFER AND USES IT FOR THE BUILDING UP OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. FOR SOME 2,000 YEARS NOW THAT'S WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS BEEN UP TO IN THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST ON THIS EARTH. WE SIMPLY PLANT THE SEED AND THE SPIRIT DOES THE GROWING.

THAT IS OUR CALL. THAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY - TO PLANT THE SEED OF THE GOSPEL - TO PUT FLESH ON OUR WORDS - TO PROCLAIM IN ACTIONS - OUR ANSWER TO JESUS' QUESTION: BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

WHO DO WE, WHO DO YOU, SAY THAT JESUS IS? AMEN.