

The Deliverance of God

August 27, 2023

Isaiah 51:1-6

¹ Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. ² Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. ³ For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. ⁴ Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. ⁵ I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. ⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

¹⁹ *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*”²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.



Today we turn to two passages that remind us to remember the rocks upon which we stand in faith. Isaiah and Jesus both remind us that we should never forget what we are made of and what it means to live as a child of God and as a follower of Christ. As we explore the deliverance of God today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

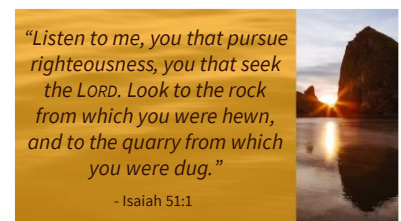
Please turn with me to Isaiah 51 as we begin this time together. In our passage today, Isaiah is writing from captivity, from a place of brokenness and despair. The Israelites were taken into captivity many years ago. They were led off in chains as their beloved temple and Jerusalem lay in ruins. They had lost their way of life and, for many, their trust in God. The place and world they once knew has now faded in their memories and they can only see decades of captivity ahead.

In an odd way, this image reminded me of being a Vikings fan. Each new season begins with a degree of hope. Usually by about November that has faded, and one becomes less optimistic with each passing game. Last year was a bit different – 13 wins. The hope burned long into the season. Until the Giants pounded them in the playoffs. In a heap the same old feelings of discouragement and the annual “there’s always next year” thoughts returned. Year after year, this can weigh on you. Never quite getting there, never quite getting over the hump - it can become your expectation. That soon makes it harder and harder to look into the future with much hope. This was the situation for the Israelites living in captivity. Yes, it was probably a lot worse for them.

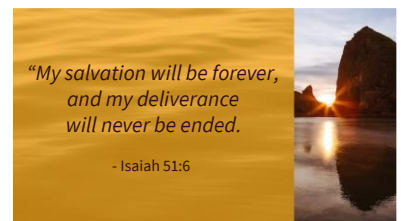
It is not surprising that the Israelites were currently living with a scarcity mentality. When it feels like one has lost everything, it is easy to really cling to whatever you have left, to be protective of those few things that you still do have. Into this scarcity mindset, Isaiah speaks an absurd vision of abundance. In the heart of captivity and despair, Isaiah seeks to fire up the people's imaginations so that God's people can engage in the deliverance that God yet offers them.

We can get stuck in the same place; our gaze fixed on scarcity. Doom-scrolling and toxic news tell us that we need to fear one another and that we need to fear the future. Consumerism tells us we need more and more. Reality soon reminds us that these things will never really be enough. Louder and louder voices, scarier and scarier scenarios begin to crowd out one's ability to imagine what God might be up to in the midst of this crazy world. Our vision can become so clouded or convoluted to recognize the ways that God is offering abundant life, right here and now. In that place it can be hard to truly hear these words of Isaiah as words of promise and hope.

In verses 1 and 2, Isaiah invites the people into the message that God has for those who are yet faithful: *"Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug."* The message first goes out to those who still have eyes to see, ears to listen, and hearts intent on drawing close to God. There is a reminder here in the invitation. Isaiah calls them to remember their foundation, their rocks, Abraham and Sarah. The prophet reminds them that from just one person God had made a great nation. The promise is that the God that has blessed them once will again bless them.



We see that promise explained in the remaining verses as Isaiah details the deliverance of the God. The Lord will bring comfort to the people. The wilderness and desert places will be made into the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness and thanksgiving and singing will be found in this garden place. God's justice will be a light for a people who know no justice. The prophet tells the people that God's deliverance will come swiftly, and that salvation will bring hope. And this vision closes with these words: *"My salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended."* This is the promise of God, both for the Israelites living in captivity and for you and me and for all people living in some form of captivity today.



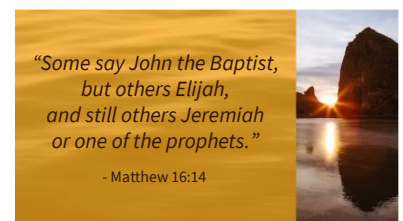
Now, it is not always easy to set aside our scarcity mentality and to fight against the lies of consumerism. Because of these tools of Satan, we can't always easily see or envision or recognize the ways that God is seeking to transform our wilderness or desert into a garden. When we get stuck in this bad place, sometimes we can even question our salvation. When we do this, we fall short of really living into the deliverance offered by the Lord. In order to open ourselves to God's work, in order to have eyes to see, we must take some practical steps. First, we must admit that we do not know everything. This step of surrender says that even though we have huge amounts of information at our fingertips and even though we are thorough planners and organizers, in surrender we admit this tendency to go it alone and we acknowledge that God may have more in store for us and for our lives – more than we can envision or imagine until we surrender to God's plan.



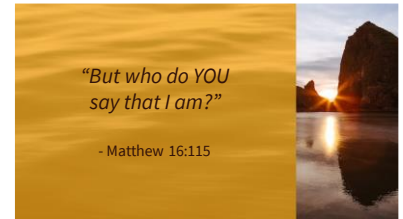
The second step is like the first in a way. This step of humility admits that we are not always right. We can hold so fast to our need to be right that it prevents us from imagining or envisioning God's "what if?" And the third step is maybe the hardest. It is to be patient. This requires time – time to allow God's plan to work itself out, to shape and form us and others, to move us slowly beyond scarcity and consumerism.

These steps of surrender and humility are necessary steps if we are to walk closely with Jesus. Before turning to our gospel text, I invite you to think about who you know that has embodied these steps of surrender and humility and, as a result, now walk closely with the Lord. Maybe a grandparent or teacher or coach comes to mind. Maybe an old friend or a pillar of the church comes to mind. Whoever it is, they all share one other important characteristic: they loved well. They knew and practiced the power of love regularly and deeply. Many of these folks taught us about God and Jesus – sometimes with words but mostly by the way that they lived his love out in their lives. Through the power of their love, they taught you and me how beloved we are by God.

In our gospel text for today, Jesus asks the disciples first about who people say he is. Please turn with me to Matthew 16 as we explore this question. The disciples offer a set of answers that are pretty standard: *"Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* The people then believed that Jesus was more than an ordinary man. But how far does this really go? Today we would get similar answers: Jesus is a good teacher, a healer, a prophet. Like the answers a lot of people would have given the disciples, the answers today would reflect less than a full commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior. In the pre-Christ time of Isaiah, the prophet was really asking the Israelites to define who God was to them too.

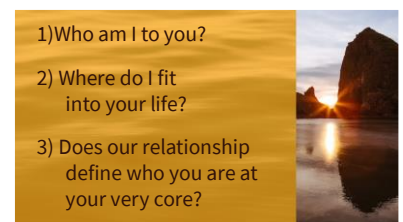


In order to really answer this question about who Jesus is, one must surrender self and one must walk humbly with God. This is what that person that you thought of did. That is what the disciples have done to get to the point of answering this question. To this group of twelve, Jesus then asks, *“But who do YOU say that I am?”* This is a very personal question that Jesus is asking his friends. Peter speaks first, declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus is pleased with Peter’s answer. But maybe not for the reason that we usually think or assume. Jesus was not looking for what we’d maybe call the typical Sunday School answer.



From our perspective, Jesus was asking more of an existential question here. In the general sense, existential questions are questions that probe the essence of what it means to be alive. So as Jesus asks this question, he is really wanting the disciples to wrestle with and to personally answer these questions about their faith:

- 1) Who am I to you?
- 2) Where do I fit into your life?
- 3) Does our relationship define who you are at your very core?



Peter got it. He knew that Jesus was asking about relationship, about connection. That is how Peter answered. “Who am I to you?” Peter recognized Jesus as his Messiah. As his Savior. “Where do I fit into your life?” By naming Jesus as *“the Son of the living God,”* Peter was telling Jesus that he felt himself being drawn in and transformed by the divine itself through his relationship with Jesus. That is why Jesus gives Simon a new name.

The change to “Peter” – the Rock – marked this transformation that was already under way in him. This name will become synonymous with the foundation of the new community of faith, the church. Jesus says, “*On this rock I will build my church.*” And the last question: “Does our relationship define who you are at your very core?”

By and large, Peter will follow Jesus faithfully for all of his life. In the Book of Acts Peter is clearly the leader in the early church. Through persecution and jailing and beatings, Peter remains true to Christ. Peter will profess Jesus as Messiah and Lord even as he breathes his last as he was crucified in Rome. Legend has it that the Roman officials first crucified Peter’s wife in front of him, trying to force him to recant. He faced her death and his own impending death with such courage and faith that his jailer was won over to Christianity. His faith and courage throughout his life answer the question: Does our relationship define who you are at your very core? ‘Yes, Jesus,’ Peter would say, ‘You are my all in all.’

As we close, let us consider how we would answer these questions. One way that we can answer these questions is with our words. “Who is Jesus to us?” He is Lord and Savior, Messiah and redeemer, hope and peace, love and joy, example and challenge. These are but a few of the words that we might use to explain who Jesus is to us. “Where does Jesus fit in our lives?” I suppose the answer to this question runs an even wider gamut. On one end of the spectrum we might say that Jesus fits in for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning once every month or two. On the other end of the spectrum, a few folks would say that Jesus is a part of every moment of their life. And there would be a few more who would say, yes on Sunday mornings, but also each morning or evening during some quiet time with God.

And the hardest question: “Does our relationship define who we are at our very core?” We’d certainly like to say yes. And, like the second question, there is a wide range of answers to this question. When pressed, those who fit church in when convenient, here and there, these folks would have to admit, ‘No, not really.’ Those who attend to their faith regularly but are not quite yet all-in, they’d answer “Mostly, Jesus.” And the ones who would say that Jesus is their all-in-all – they’d tell you that yes Jesus is absolutely at the core of who and what they are. This week I hope that you’ll consider your answers to these questions. They are in GPS question #3.

The second way that we can answer these questions is with our life itself. The old adage, “Actions speak louder than words,” would apply here. When John the Baptist was in prison, facing sure death, he sent his disciples to Jesus, asking basically the same question. John puts it this way: “*Are you the one that is to come?*” (Matthew 11:3).

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”
- Matthew 11:4-5



Jesus’ reply was this: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*” What you hear and see.

Who am I to you? Where do I fit into your life? Does our relationship define who you are at your very core? What you hear and see. So, my friends, how does your life – the way you live your faith out loud every day – how does your life answer these questions? From their encounters with you, do the spiritually blind begin to see the light? From their time spent with you, are the broken able to begin to walk upright again? From the ways you love them, would others say that you have brought them the good news of salvation and eternal life?

What you hear and see. In and through your words and your actions, do others experience the deliverance of God?

Because of the way that Jesus fits into your life and defines who you are at your core, do others encounter the living Son of God whenever they have been in your presence?



It is my hope and prayer that we can answer “yes” to these questions. We are loved by God so that we can love others in kind. We are redeemed so that we can help others to experience God’s redeeming power. We are made new again through the mercy and grace of Christ so that we can help others to experience deliverance from their sins too. In all things, may others hear and see Christ in us. May it be so for us all. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Why is it important to fully understand who and what Christ is to you before witnessing to others about Jesus?
- 2) *Pray*. First, offer a prayer of thanksgiving for that grandparent, friend, coach... who loved you into Christ. Second, ask God whom you’re being called to love.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 25:31-46. How do these words add to or affect the ways you might answer these questions: Who am I to you? Where do I fit into your life? Does our relationship define who you are at your very core?