

Isaiah 50: 4-9a  
Psalm 116: 1-8  
James 3: 1-12  
Mark 8: 27-38

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Year B Proper 19  
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### **Who Do We Say We Are?**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to Thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. Welcome back and welcome home to this brand new program year at The Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It's an exciting time in the life of this parish.

In the coming weeks and months, we will be asking, and answering the question in ways large and small that Jesus posed to Peter? "Who do you say that I am?" "Who do we say that we are?" This week the Rev. Luke Selles accepted our call to be our new Priest Associate for Children, Youth, and Families. In the coming months we are likely to call a new rector to St. Martin's. And every day at this parish we are saying who we are and working towards who we will become as we sail into our 135th Anniversary Year.

During these past two years we have traversed some turbulent waters. At times there has been deep confusion, anger and frustration. At times, I felt it too. While we never lost our way, it was, quite frankly, often hard to see the shoreline or the horizon. But not anymore.

And you are the reason for that. St. Martin's rallied in ways that were not just impressive but staggering in their commitment and determination to keep moving together in the name and love of Jesus Christ. We knew what had to be done and although at times it felt like a quiet slog, we persisted and never turned back.

It is exhilarating to be standing in this moment together. Our ship has been righted. We have the wind at our back. Our sails are full. The horizon is bright and we are sailing toward it with our love, confidence, and faith in Jesus Christ. And now that our magnificent choir is back, we have a song in our hearts.

Jesus asks his disciples about the word on the street: what are people saying about me? Are they getting it? This invitation to a new life in God's kingdom? The answers weren't terrible; John the Baptist. Elijah. One of the prophets. But they still were not quite there.

It is easy to imagine how sweet the moment must have felt when Peter, that hapless disciple, says exactly what his teacher hopes to hear: You are the Messiah.

The small band of Jesus' motley disciples are the steppingstones to the future Jesus knows he won't be here to continue to build and create. Maybe it will all be worth it. Maybe. Maybe it's safe to tell them what comes next. To know that Peter and the rest will rally behind him and walk with him to the bitter, tortured end.

Hardly. Jesus tells his disciples what's to come. And in an instant, whatever hope Jesus had was torched. Disintegrated. He lashes out.

“Get behind me Satan.”

Ugly. Powerful. Real.

And for Peter, so utterly human. This is all going to end? We’re going to be abandoned? You’re leaving us?

Then things get real. Tough love. Jesus instructs the crowd. You are going to have to give up your life. Deny yourselves. It doesn’t sound like a winning message unless we widen our focus. As Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests:

Maybe it’s really denying the self that wants to see itself as separate from God and others...Denying that the self that does not feel worthy of God’s love or denying the self that thinks it is more worthy of God’s love than its enemy is...or denying the self that’s turned on the self.

The life Jesus is asking them to give up is the one defined by our own egos, the life we want, think we should have, or feel we’ve earned and deserved. I think all of us can resonate with that to an extent.

But Jesus is asking for something else: to trust that there is, in him and through him a vision of the world and our lives that is beyond our powers of imagination. It is one that asks us to walk alongside him, picking up our cross, for the sake of the gospel and understanding that the cost of discipleship may often be high.<sup>1</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the cost of discipleship from the inside out. During the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, the German theologian and Lutheran pastor wrote a book of the same name--the cost of discipleship—arguing that the Protestant church could not remain silent and had to stand up to Nazism. The point of church, for Bonhoeffer, was to ground and grow people in faith and Christ to act in the world and understanding the high cost of discipleship was essential. Bonhoeffer lived his life with these words widely attributed to him:

Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

Active in the German resistance against Hitler, Bonhoeffer came to the United States to teach at Union Theological Seminary in NY, my alma mater in 1939. Friends urged him to remain in the States and stay safe. But he couldn’t, returning to Germany within just two weeks. Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested by the Nazis for being in a group plotting to assassinate Hitler. He preached and taught in prison for 18 months, and then, 11 days before his prison camp was liberated by American troops, he was hanged to death. Bonhoeffer was 39.

It is unlikely that any of us will ever face such a dramatic end. But Bonhoeffer’s life is a powerful reminder about the cost of discipleship. Of choice. Of saying who we are, which this nation will do in 50 days.

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<sup>1</sup> Bolz-Weber, Nadia, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, Crown Publishing, 2015

We in this parish have much to celebrate and we surely will in the weeks and months ahead. We are preparing for a new, bold, chapter in the 135<sup>th</sup> year history of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. It is a blessing to belong to this community. It is a blessing to honor all that this parish has been and a blessing to be able to imagine a bold new future together.

But all of our promise, all of our privilege, and all of the possibilities before us point to a choice: Who do we say we are?

AMEN