

“Who Do You Say that I Am?”
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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
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Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Who do you say that I am?

In the year 2000, I went on my first pilgrimage with my church, Christ and St. Luke’s, to the Holy Land and to see the Passion Play in Oberammergau. At the time I was still a stage manager at Virginia Stage Company, and I had felt called to the pilgrimage even though I had never wanted to go to Israel before. When I called my mom to ask if I was crazy for wanting to go over where it’s all desert and they fight all the time, she asked if that was an invitation. She went with me.

On the 3rd day of the pilgrimage, after a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee and a visit to the Mount of the Beatitudes, we traveled north by bus through mine fields left from earlier conflicts to Caesarea Philippi, where we renewed our baptismal covenant at one of the main sources of the Jordan River. The priest leading the pilgrimage dipped branches in the water and asperged or sprinkled us, and the bishop co-leading talked about the significance of water. It’s an ancient site where Greeks and Romans built temples to the god Pan. After the renewal of vows, my mom and I and a few of the other pilgrims walked up to the mouth of the large cave that was thought to be an entrance to the underworld.

Before Jesus was born, the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had given the city, then called Paneas, to Herod to govern, who in turn built a white marble temple to the emperor. When his son Philipp inherited the position, he renamed it Caesarea Philippi after himself and the emperor.

"It was a city held by empire, named by empire, dedicated to those who called themselves sons of gods." Place matters

It was Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asked this important question of his disciples.

Who do you say that I am?

Whenever I hear this story, I feel like I'm back in school being asked a question by the teacher and wondering if I maybe I hadn't been paying attention when we covered the material. I can't help but wonder if the disciples felt the same. The first question he asks is about what others think. The disciples can report what they've heard – well, some say John the Baptist and others say Elijah or Jeremiah. Basically, Jesus, they're saying you're like the prophets.

And then comes the kicker. He asks them directly, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

In asking who he is, Jesus is also asking the disciples who they are. If they are following him, walking in his way, then how are they understanding that way.

Simon Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It's a pretty risky thing to say what he is saying in the place where he is saying it. You are the Messiah, the Anointed one, the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Note *living* God, not the *dead* gods all around us.) It is you, Jesus, who we are following, not the empire, not those who are colluding with the emperor, not the way of power that rules through force, but the way of love.

Bishop Jake Owensby calls the spirit of our current time the will to power. He writes, “The will to power strives for dominance and demands submission.”¹ In contrast, Jesus, and those who follow him follow the way of love, “Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another.” (John 13:43.)

Who do you say that I am? Whose way are you going to follow?

Paul writes to the early followers of the way of Jesus in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...”

What does it mean to not be conformed to this world? Of course we are conformed to this world. We were born and raised here and everything around us is this world.

How do we discern the will of God?

I don’t know about you, but I’m better at discerning the will of me than the will of God.

The will of me says hide from the pain of the world. Eat more ice cream, especially if it has chocolate in it.

The will of God says don’t look away. I am that I am. I hold the pain of the world. You bear the part I’ve given you to bear. There’s nothing wrong with eating ice cream, but don’t use it as an escape or a distraction.

The will of me says the powers of the world are big and I am small. There’s not much I can do to change the wrongs being done with my money in the name of my

¹ Owensby, Jake, “Faithful Presence,” *The Woodlands: A Place to Explore the Way of Jesus*, Substack, August 21, 2026, <https://jakeowensby.substack.com/p/faithful-presence>.

country and sometimes in the name of my God. I'll just wait it out and hope someone else will do something.

The will of God says, again, you do your part. I have given you and everyone around you unique gifts that I'd like you to use in my service. I have not given you all the gifts. You are not responsible for all the parts. Look at the midwives who served at the time when Moses was born. They defied the empire of their time and refused to kill newborn baby boys. They did what they knew was right in the sphere that they could influence. Look to Shiphrah and Puah if you need an example. Use what I have given you in the place where you are.

The will of me says it's too hard, I'm too tired, how come those who are following the will of power seem to have no consequences while so many who are following the way of love are suffering so much?

The will of God says, come to me all you who are weary and I will refresh you. My yoke is easy and my burden is light because you are not carrying it alone. This is way too big for you to carry on your own. Rest in me, trust in me, and I will carry you through.

Who do you say that I am?

How we answer that question determines the way that we will follow. The way of the will to power or the humble way of love.

And the way we learn the will of God is by listening. We all have ways of praying and ways that God speaks to us. Whether it's through someone else or reading scripture, studying, centering prayer, being out in the creation, or any number of ways – there are as many ways to pray as there are people on the planet.

My way is often through music and song lyrics.

On the pilgrimage to the Holy Land we had a little booklet of services and hymns that we used in various locations. When I got home, I began praying Compline at night and singing some of the songs. The one that brought tears was, “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me.” Little did I know that the seeds had been planted in that place. Today is the 18th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. I never would have guessed that I would end up here, and I’m so grateful I have.

(Sheep story on Kerrera – The Way Knows the Way)

On the pilgrimage to Iona that I went on this summer (and I promise you’ll be hearing more about that,) is the playlist that our guide created for us. All week as I’ve been sitting with and praying with our scriptures, I’ve had the lyrics from one of them playing over and over in my head. It’s a song called “The Fire of Creation” by Abbi Spinner McBride, a chant invoking the element of fire. When I pondered Paul’s injunction to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in order to discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect, I found myself praying these words to the Holy Spirit:

Illuminate us

Make us all new

Purify and transform

Make us like you.

(Sing verse to close.)