

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

When considering my homilies, I often say two things. First, I typically do not name or title them as some pastors do. And second, I do **not** preach in a series, you know, like the next five Sundays are a series on prayer, or something similar. The truth, however, is that in some ways the latter is not exactly true. As I said last week and **until** last week, I had always followed the Revised Common Lectionary or RCL religiously, pun intended again.

Now, I am pretty sure that I have told you a little bit about the RCL, but here is a little more information. In many churches the selection of readings is left up to the pastor, letting the pastor determine what they feel "led" to preach about or on. This type of church is typically described as a non-liturgical church. Liturgical churches have been using a variety of different lectionaries for years until 1969. After the Vatican II Council the Roman Catholic Church produced a three-year lectionary for its use. The Consultation on Church Union produced, in 1974, a lectionary for use in protestant churches. In 1983 the Common Lectionary was then produced and subsequently in 1994 it became the RCL. The RCL much like its predecessors uses a three-year cycle of readings for each Sunday in the church year with typically, but not always, the use of an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a reading from the books of the New Testament after the Gospels, and a reading from the synoptic gospels. There are then interspersed, at certain key points, occasional readings from the Gospel of John.

The readings for the first six-months of the church year are like a Cliff-Notes look, you know – the high lights, of the life and ministry of Jesus with the readings aligned to key events in the first six of the seven church seasons; Advent, Christmas, Time after Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. In the remaining six-months of the year, the readings fill in the gaps of Jesus life, ministry, parables, and teachings during the season known as the Time after Pentecost. The truth is that there really is a **pattern** in these readings and when I changed the readings last week I broke that normal pattern. That being said, the normal pattern **does** remain and we are returning to it for the most part, besides there is also a clear link from my homily last week and the readings today, well, at least in my head. I also believe there is a clear connection between our lives today on Maui and the lives envisioned in our readings today.

There are seventeen books in the Old Testament called prophetic writings. Some are called major prophets and some are called minor prophets. Many people today think of prophetic writings as foretelling or even predicting the future. But that is not the typical Hebrew understanding of the prophets. For the Hebrews, the prophets normally identified Hebrew failures to God, with warnings, and then **always** the offer of **hope** by the recalling of God's promises.

Our Isaiah reading today is in the midst of Isaiah 40 through 55 which is often called the prophet of the exile. The prophet's purpose is to **encourage**, those who are faithfully trying to be faithful, to look ahead to God's promised deliverance. They are in exile, but God **is** going to take them home. The exile was a time of trouble in some ways much like the time of trouble we are experiencing today.

What sometimes comes with the stress of trouble, like being in exile? Why – anxiety. In 1964, the newscaster Eric Sevareid said: "*The biggest big business in America is not steel, automobiles, or television. It is the manufacture, refinement, and distribution of anxiety.*" Anyone care to hazard a guess as to the first word used in the Webster dictionary as a synonym for anxiety? Of course, fear.

Just as the Matthew passage for today deals with identity, so does this short passage from Isaiah. For Matthew the question was, "Who do people say that Jesus is?" In Isaiah it is **not** the leaders identity under scrutiny but that of the people themselves. The prophet asks them to look at their own heritage. They are to think of themselves as children of promise, envisioned long beforehand by a God who singled out one unpromising couple for blessings. And we, my friends, are also now inheritors of that very same promise. Do you believe that? Is it inherent in your **being** and in your way of **thinking**?

Questions of identity are at the center of the Gospels, especially Jesus' identity. Mark Allan Powell in his book "Introducing the New Testament" describes the picture each of the Gospels uses to identify Jesus. Matthew presents Jesus as the one who abides with God's people until the end of time. Mark presents Jesus as the one who announces the advent of God's kingdom. Luke presents Jesus as the one whose words and deeds liberate those who are oppressed. And finally, John presents Jesus as the one who reveals what God is truly like.

David Lose said in his commentary that it is clearly important to Matthew to give Peter this moment in the sun. After all, none of the other disciples could manage to say anything in response to Jesus' question. Maybe just the **recognition** of Peter's confession is important for us as well. Think about it. Peter goes onto completely misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter will later resist Jesus' intentions to give into the authorities. And eventually, Peter will even deny and desert Jesus. Does this sound somewhat familiar? But think about it again, at this **one point** in time, Peter confessed Jesus' divinity. Maybe we should just be thankful for that.

Verse 17 says: "**Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but God in heaven.**" God was at work in Peter. Yes, Peter would screw up mightily, but in this moment God was at work – and, oh by the way, God would be at work later, too. Have you felt or seen God at work in you? Well, just for the record, God **is** at work in you **and** through you.

How we identify Jesus will impact what we believe, how we interact with one another, and how we interact with the earth. Jesus asked two questions. What do others say? And, Who do you say that I am? And guess what? The disciples were silent. With the exception of Peter, they do not seem to have an opinion of their own. So what about you? Are you silent like the disciples? Can you identify who God is to you? Are you grateful to have God at work in your life? Are you grateful that God has brought you to this community of believers? I am.

Hear then the good news:

The prophet called on the exiles to look back, to look down, and to look around in order to find **reasons** to look ahead to God's deliverance that is surely coming.

We are called to do the same looking. Can we? Will we?

Gratitude is a powerful thing.

Gratitude can also be an empowering thing.

Can you see and sense and hear your own confessions even though they are imperfect?

Even though you may be confused or even in fear, are you still trying to live out your confession?

Are you confessing, speaking and acting in ways that are only possible because they are empowered not by flesh and blood but by God.

Then be grateful, for God is at work in you.

God has redeemed you.

You are marked with the cross of Christ.

You are an inheritor of the kingdom of God.

Pastor O. W. Prince said: "Church folks and God folks are not the same thing. Church folks go to church, God folks **are** The Church."

Are you a church folk? Or are you a God folk?

Grace and peace to you, my friends, God **is** at work in you.

Amen