

## **Who Do You Say That I Am?**

TEXT: Matthew 16:13-26

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on March 22, 2026*

We are approaching what historically has been the greatest celebration of the Christian year: The Day of Resurrection. Easter.

Easter comes on the heels of the great grief of the Crucifixion, which the Romans were eager for anyway, but was hastened by a deep betrayal of one of Jesus' twelve closest disciples.

That betrayal came about, I believe, because, when Judas considered the question Jesus posed to his disciples in the passage Cathy just read, "Who do you say that I am?" Judas didn't truly understand the answer.

A number of times across my years with you, we've looked at the landscape of Judaism in Israel in Jesus' day. It was highly fractured, with everyone expecting the Messiah promised by the Hebrew Scriptures, but with very different expectations of what that Messiah would be and do.

A brief look at their history before Jesus' birth explains this—and I think lends credence to my theory (which didn't originate with me) of why Judas did what he did.

So, travel back in your mind to Israel about 170 years before Jesus' birth. Israel at that time was ruled by the Greeks, who conquered Jerusalem under Alexander the Great in 332 BCE.

Alexander had taken Jerusalem from the Persians who had conquered it under Cyrus the Great in 539. Cyrus took it from the Babylonian Empire, who themselves had taken it from the Assyrians, way back in 721 BCE.

Empire after empire after empire, wanting to control Israel's strategic access to the Mediterranean, had ravaged Jerusalem and its people—sometimes with great savagery, sometimes less so, but, for over 550 years, Israel had been an occupied country and at the mercy of foreign governments with all their laws and abuses.

Then, in 167 BCE, the people of Israel finally had enough and revolted against the Greeks. It was a political revolt for independence, but it was also a religious revolt, as the Jews in Israel felt that Greek culture was disrupting Jewish life.

The tensions from that resonate centuries later, throughout much of the New Testament, as Paul established churches throughout Asia minor and Jews who were more traditional were in conflict with Jews who embraced Hellenistic culture.

The Jewish revolt against Greece took seven years and was led by a group of Jewish fighters under the command of a man named Judas Maccabeus.

It is often called the Maccabean revolt, because Judas and his whole family were in it to win it; and win it they did when the Maccabees took Jerusalem back from the Greeks and reconsecrated the altar, which is the celebration remembered during the Jewish feast of Hannukah.

The books of the Bible that are canon for the Catholic church and that Protestants have in a separate section called the Apocrypha, if they have them at all, give all that history in the four books of the Maccabees.

After Jerusalem was taken by Judas and his army, other smaller battles for the surrounding regions still went on, and Judas Maccabeus was killed in a battle with a Greek general in 160 BCE.

But by 141 BCE, the Maccabees had successfully regained all their territory and had gained independence for Israel for the first time in more than 550 years.

In order to secure that independence, they made a security agreement with the new kid on the block, who also enjoyed trouncing the Greeks, Rome. Play ominous organ music here.

That agreement bought 78 years of independence for Israel, and then Rome decided they could just take the country, which they did in 63 BCE.

And that is the state of affairs, when a star lights up over Bethlehem, and the Jewish King, Herod the Great, installed as a puppet for the Roman empire, decided the rumors of a new king born to the Jews posed a threat and killed all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem.

Except the one who fled to Egypt with his parents and stayed there as refugees until it was safe to go home.

Put yourself in the shoes of a people who had known self-rule for only 78 of the previous 700 years, and the loss of that freedom was within living memory. Both the freedom and the wounds from its loss, with the people once again vassals to be exploited and used for the empire, were fresh.

Jesus actually had two disciples named Judas. One is simply called Jude in the text and today there's a wonderful hospital named in his honor.

The other disciple is distinguished from the one called Jude by including his family name, Judas Iscariot, and he has the honor of being assigned to Dante's ninth and lowest level of hell, reserved for traitors, and depicted often with his head being bitten off by the devil.

But if you zoomed out beyond the twelve, to the hundreds of people who called themselves Jesus' disciples, I bet there were tons of people named Judas. It was a hero's name and, importantly, a very specific kind of hero's name. It was a warrior hero who had given his life to win freedom for his people.

The expectation that the Messiah would be a warrior was built into the expectation that the Messiah would come from the line of King David, who ruled Israel in 1000 BCE, and was a warrior king, who had captured Jerusalem for his capital from the Philistines.

Never mind that God rebuffs King David's offer to build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem because he has too much blood on his hands, those crying out to Jesus as "Son of David" were hoping for a warrior Messiah who would overthrow the Roman government so the people again could govern themselves and be free to worship as they pleased.

The political faction that rose up around the violent overthrow option became known as the Zealots; and, although they didn't exist as an organized group during Jesus' lifetime, at least one of Jesus' twelve disciples became affiliated with them later, as the Bible calls him "Simon the Zealot."

That faction did make their move at another revolt in the year 70 and Rome squashed it like a bug and burned Jerusalem and the temple to the ground.

But that was just one Messianic expectation in Jesus' day. There were others who responded to once again falling under the thumb of a foreign power by retreating into the mountains and living an ascetic lifestyle. They condemned the corruption they saw in Jerusalem as those meant to protect their faith began to protect the empire instead.

There were several groups like that, and they are the likely authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the caves where they lived. In biblical characters, that faction is represented by John the Baptist—the voice crying out in the wilderness, clothed in animal skins and eating locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist was also Jesus' cousin.

There were still others who expected the Messiah to be another Elijah or one of the other prophets, and we hear the diversity of opinions in the passage that Cathy read, as Jesus' asks first who *other* people are saying that he is.

But then Jesus gets more personal and says, “Well, what about all of you? Who do YOU say that I am.” Peter gets the gold star for saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” but that by no means settles things. I think Jesus knows that, which is why I think he tells his disciples not to tell anybody.

“Do not under any circumstances post that to social media or it will take on a life of its own and who knows what will happen. You don’t understand what I mean yet. Let me first show you the kind of Messiah I am. Then you can describe your belief in terms of what you have heard me say and what you have seen me do.”

I think Judas agreed with Peter that Jesus was the Messiah; but given his name and the history around him; and given the fact that when he saw what happened when Jesus was arrested he went back to those who had arrested him, threw his thirty pieces of silver back in their faces and went out and hanged himself—before Jesus even got to the cross—I just don’t believe betrayal or simple greed was his motivation. There is instant remorse so great that he takes his own life.

I think Judas belonged to the camp that believed the Messiah would overthrow the government, believed that Jesus had what it took to be that person, but thought Jesus was taking too long.

I think Judas getting Jesus arrested was meant to start the ball of revolution rolling, as he could wait no longer. And maybe lighting that fire would allow him to live up to his hero’s name.

In a sense, it’s not unlike what we talked about last week with people really eager to have a war in the Middle East and destroy the environment out of a misplaced belief that creating the conditions of Armageddon in the book of Revelation would force Jesus to return.

The attempt to force God’s hand didn’t go well for Judas and I don’t believe it’s going to go well now, either. Because that’s not how it works.

Jesus does seem to know what Judas was going to do as they celebrated Passover together, and maybe that’s because Jesus had special foreknowledge of events. But maybe Jesus just knew the way Judas thought; maybe he could see in his eyes that he was done waiting. Maybe they had had the argument many times during their three previous years together.

But my point in trying to dig into Judas’ possible motivation for his betrayal, is to highlight that what we believe shows up in our actions, and can have consequences well beyond our imagining—both for good or for ill.

That threat is vastly increased when you start bringing religious beliefs into it; and, when you join religious beliefs with the ambitions of political power, you have a genocidal killing machine.

Every large-scale Christian atrocity I can think of, and there have been many, has come in times and places where church and state have joined forces—with the church being given law enforcement powers to suppress dissent and teach propaganda as Gospel, and the state, in return, being anointed as God’s special agent in the world.

In the ancient world, millennia before Jesus, it was called the Divine Right of Kings. And both the religious leaders and the politicians scooped up as much money, land, and power as they can from those crushed beneath its wheels.

While each of those combined powers contained those whose beliefs can be bought and shaped for the right price; they have also contained a lot of sincere Christians, who got sucked in because they have never stepped back and answered Jesus’ question. “Who do YOU say that I am?”

“Do you know? Or have you just followed Peter’s gold-star answer of “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” without going deeper?” That whole sentence of Peter’s answer can be interpreted in as many ways as there are people.

Not only do I think Judas misunderstood what it meant, I don't think Peter had enough understanding under the hood of those words either.

Jesus calls Peter the "rock" on which he will build his church in verse 18. And just five verses later Jesus is calling Peter "Satan" for telling Jesus that the suffering Jesus just told Peter he will have to undergo was basically catastrophic thinking and Jesus should have a more optimistic attitude.

And by the time that suffering that Jesus predicted is taking place, Judas is killing himself and Peter is weeping bitterly after having denied even knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Some rock.

The question, "Who do you say that I am?" is a perfect one. Jesus doesn't ask "Do you believe in me?" which would require a lot of extra interpretation of what "believe" meant.

But "Who do you say that I am?" is a perfectly clear starting point, leaving room for people who have all kinds of beliefs about Jesus nature—from people who think he was simply a wise rabbi, a misguided leader or con man, a man with extraordinary gifts from God but still only human, God in the flesh, and all kinds of other permutations.

And how each of us answers that question, within our heart of hearts, will affect what we believe about other things, how we behave, and what we believe about ourselves and those we interact with day by day. It will affect how we see this earth and the other living beings who live among us and beyond us.

Those beliefs are all layered, and as we dig, we may find things that don't belong—maybe something that got inserted into our belief system from the outside—maybe by our parents, a school, a church, a peer group, a public figure we admire, or whatever.

And in finding such a thing we have options. We might toss it, amend it, or embrace it and decide that belief is more fundamental to our core values than a bunch of things we had on top of it. And then we could clean out above it to make our lives more aligned with what we profess to believe.

The whole point of this series is to encourage each of us to stop scrolling and think. What do I actually believe? And that becomes productive when we adopt the posture of a toddler and ask ourselves, "Okay, but why?"

And then keep asking "why?" all the way down until we understand where our beliefs come from—beliefs about anything: God, Jesus, people, the meaning of life, suffering, work—it's all the same process.

As children, we all, to some degree, had some software installed by those inside and outside the family who raised us. We have programs running in the background of our lives that we don't even know are there.

We've been talking about some heavy things in these weeks, so I'll close with what for me was a comical example of background programming suddenly encountering reality.

Come with me back to my first appointment in Cross City, Florida, in the mid 1990's, as I'm attending the ecumenical Thanksgiving Eve service. It was hosted by a different church each year and, on this particular occasion, it was hosted by the Pentecostal Holiness church in town.

Pentecostal churches are pretty free-wheeling, and toward the start of the service, the hosting pastor decided that the gathered town should bless all the clergy in the room. Remember, there were a ton of churches in that town.

So, he called us all forward. There were, maybe 15-16 of us, all but one of us a man. The pastor was making this up as he went, so there was no scripted blessing or anything, and he invited the congregation to gaze upon all these "men of God" across the front.

I saw some people exchange glances. He went into extemporaneous prayer for the men who served the churches of Cross City, asking God to bless the men who stood before him.

I don't believe he was consciously trying to exclude me in that. I think he believed, as did probably everyone else in that room, that in the English language, the word "men" was inclusive, and meant both men and women. But as I stood there, in the midst of a sea of my male colleagues, the congregation could clearly see the problem with that belief.

Pentecostal prayers can be quite lengthy; and he kept going. But every successive time that he called us all men or used the pronouns "he" or "him" to refer to each of us, the response from the congregation became more audible.

First a couple of people kind of coughed, then some began to giggle, and they were downright laughing toward the end. And it wasn't that Pentecostal "laughing in the Spirit" thing.

And the more they responded that way, the more red-faced the pastor became, as he finally figured out why people were laughing. But he literally didn't know how to speak in any other way and could only say "Amen" and wrap up.

Nothing was said either publicly or privately after that service; but it didn't need to be. Nothing could have pierced the myth that the word "men" really means all genders like a room full of people watching a long line of men and one woman, all being called men over and over and over.

I can't stress enough how conservative that town was—and is. I had to do some strategic politicking just to be allowed into the ecumenical clergy group in the first place, because pretty much the whole town thought having a woman in the pulpit was evil, including people in the church I was serving.

*Talking* about a different use of language—to those very same people on that very same night—would have been thoroughly ignored; and people might have jeered or walked out.

But seeing it play out in the flesh, with me just standing there at the front with the others, popped the bubble; and the belief that saying "men" meant everybody was shown to be so patently silly that people from all those churches began laughing, during a prayer, in church, on Thanksgiving Eve.

A deep examination of our own beliefs could prevent wars or it could merely prevent public humiliation; but it's always a good idea to do it. Amen.