

More than an Name

When did Jesus become more than a name to you?

That might be a tough question for those of us born and raised in the church. After all, Jesus was probably the center of many of the first stories you ever heard, from picture Bibles, flannelgraphs or songs with a lot of actions. Jesus was a household name, it was the air that you breathed.

But at some point in our lives, God becomes personal. And our understanding of Jesus is intricately interwoven with our understanding of God.

The question that drew me in to today's text as I reflected on it this week,
was:

What compels a lifetime fisherman to stand up in front of a crowd and preach a sermon glorifying a man who was executed by the state just weeks earlier?

We project what we know about Peter onto this text: The rock upon whom the church was built.

The apostle, the saint, the legend.

But at this point in the story, Peter is just a poor Galilean fisherman who happened to receive a call to follow a man that he knew for less time than any of you have known Pastor Jon.

Peter was not an aspiring orator, he had no dream of starting a new religion. And instead of returning to the vocation he knew best: fishing, he set out to proclaim the scandal of Jesus to all who would listen, until he was also crucified by the Emperor Nero, 30 years after Jesus suffered the same fate.

There is nothing normal about that. Not by modern standards, not by ancient standards.

At some point Jesus became more than a name to Peter.

I imagine it was a conversation that the disciples had frequently, sometimes with Jesus: “and who do *you* say that I am,” and sometimes whispered among themselves.

Is this guy for real? Is this a life worth leaving everything we know behind?

The Romans used crucifixion, the most brutal of all executions, to punish revolutionaries because it was so effective. The Jewish world was full of revolutionaries and even messiah claimants whose story ended with crucifixion and whose names were lost to history, their following evaporating as fast as it had materialized.

Except for Jesus.

The resurrection event was shocking and unprecedented, and while our modern sensibilities can wrestle with what exactly transpired, there is no doubt that whatever happened caused a Galilean fisherman to give up everything he knew to tell everyone he knew and die a martyr's death.

At some point Jesus became more than a name to Peter.

I was also challenged by this text because the short sermon that Peter preaches (the first sermon ever preached!) is probably not the sermon we find most compelling.

It is a bit bossy and accusatory and sure of itself:

“This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.”

Definite? Foreknowledge? *You* crucified?
A little humility please.

We don't talk like that anymore Peter.

Also, lifting proof texts out of the psalms where the connections feel sketchy at best is the kind of copy and paste theology we have been taught to avoid, at least if we want more than B- on an essay.

For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:

*“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”*

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

If the content of Peter's sermon doesn't resonate as strongly with you, it is good to remember that Peter's sermon did resonate with the audience he was speaking to.

Peter was using the material of *his* day to make his claims, proclaiming the power of the resurrection in the face of great skepticism, which is no different than what we do today.

The language has changed, the message has not.

Like Peter we seek to explain why and how Jesus became more than just a name to us.

That transformation occurs in scripture through the language of repentance and baptism.

It is the language used by John the Baptist, it is the language used by Jesus himself, and not surprisingly it is the language that will be prevalent in the early sermons that we find in the book of Acts.

If “repentance” is a word that carries baggage for you, keep in mind that the Greek word, *metanoia*, is essentially describing what results from hearing, feeling and a conviction to act.

For as long as Jesus was alive, Peter *heard*, he listened he learned.

He *felt* through the relationship that developed with Jesus.

And upon Jesus’ death and resurrection this *convicted him to act*, to step out of the shadows as a Jesus listener and step into the role as a Jesus proclaimer.

When you hear, feel and are convicted to act, what do you do?

You are baptized into the movement.

The text goes on to say that 3000 were added to their number that day.

There is a power in ritual and in physically embodying the transformation that has captured our hearts.

For Peter and for 3000 early believers that day, the resurrection would be the event, the paradigm through which they would understand the world, both God’s plan for it, and the way God would work in it.

Mitzi Smith writes:

“God always has more to say than what humans can express or capture. The resurrection of Jesus serves as a perennial testimony of how God’s acts are not our acts and are at times diametrically opposed to our acts. When God raised and exalted Jesus, God defied the boundaries of human knowledge and experience, not by solving the mystery of life and death but by reasserting, in a new way, God’s power over both.”

Acts 2:37 says that Peter’s words “pierced their hearts.” The Good News broke through the barriers of language and culture and religion and social

stature and pierced the people to their very hearts, just as the good news was meant to do.”

Do you believe that God pierced the hearts of the people listening to Peter that day?

Do you believe that the God of Creation continues to do so, generation after generation? To reach through our hardened, skeptical and disillusioned hearts to whisper that there is more to our lives than our day to day existence?

Do you believe that we find that in Jesus?

When did Jesus become more than a name to you?

Maybe you are here this morning because you’ve always come here every Sunday morning and you couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

Maybe you’ve left so much of your childhood convictions behind that you wonder what’s left beside your connection to the people.

Maybe you just came for the coffee.

But I hope that in all of the doubts and the messiness of life,
In all of the ways the church has disappointed you and let you down,
That there is something about Jesus that you keep coming back to.
That like Peter, you have heard, you have felt, and you have been convicted to act. To be baptized into *this* body of wonderers and wanderers,
Clinging to a Jesus and a resurrection that is the way, the truth and the life.

The way you experience it, the way you share it, the way you live it will manifest itself in ways that are different than Peter and that is ok.
But I pray that the hope, the mystery and the promise of resurrection, that we revisit every year at Easter, burns in your heart like it did for Peter, and that you feel convicted to share it with those around you who need it most.

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Acts 2:14a, 36-41
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