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The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"The Eternal Question"

"He ask them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"» (Mark 8:29 NRSV)

As every family well knows, sometimes vacations are a disaster! So it was with Jesus and his little band of followers. He and his disciples had tried to escape into the northern hills, but the mobs seeking healing had followed and cut him off. Then there was that incident with the Canaanite woman. She caught him when he was tired and irritable; he made an uncharacteristic sharp remark and she called him on it; he was off guard and he paid for it. So Jesus and his band circled back and found this quiet retreat among the rocks. Quickly, he gets right to the point. "Men, we need to talk. First, tell me, who do people say that I am?"

Sensing the urgency of the situation, the disciples spare Jesus the usual gossip, of which he had already been accused anyway; that he was a phony, a wine-bibber, a rabble-rouser, and a general disgrace to the Jewish religion. Instead, they

immediately pass on some of the more interesting guesses: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other major league Old Testament prophets.

The mention of John must have evoked some laughter! After all, Jesus was alive and had already begun *his* ministry when John was beheaded; and besides, they were quite different in style and appearance! The other names, however, bear thoughtful consideration for two reasons. First, the concept of reincarnation was quite acceptable in some circles. While contrary to the Biblical and Rabbinical teaching of the Hebrews, the idea must have been passed on at the popular level since the time the Jews were in Egypt. Thus the idea of Jesus being the reincarnation of a former prophet was compatible with the times. Second, it was commonly thought, and proven from Scripture, that when Messiah came, Elijah would somehow precede him. To this day, at the Seder on the eve of Passover, every Jewish family reserves a place for *the Prophet*, and his seat remains empty throughout the meal!

Jesus, however, moves quickly to the more important question: "Who do you say that I am?" Or in other words, from your perspective, Who am I? Assuming that our Greek New Testament followed

faithfully the Aramaic words of Jesus, a transliteration into English proves most interesting: "Who say you me to be?" Note the similarity with the very Name of God given to Moses. In Hebrew it is: "*Yahweh. Ehyeh asher ehyeh. I am who I am; I will be what I will be!*" In one small phrase, Jesus has converted the guesses of the crowds into the eternal question!

At Caesarea Philippi there is a large rock with an unusual projection and formation. I stood with my tour group under this rock where tradition says that our favorite spokesperson answered the eternal question with the eternal answer. Often accused of being a bit slow, Simon Bar-Jona was humming this time when he said: "You are the Messiah(You are the Christ)."

In Matthew's version of this same event(16:13-20), Jesus responds with a blessing and points out that the answer is a piece of eternity that has come from his Father who is in heaven; the living God, and the God of the living. To solidify the event, Simon gets a new name, Petra, Greek for rock, for on this "rock" of information, Jesus will build his church. The primacy of "a person" has nothing to do with it; it is eternal, it came from God.

Eternal questions, eternal answers; they are really quite easy to deal with from an academic point of view. But now the sermon gets tough, because I need to ask each of you, "Who do you say that he is?" Do you believe the story? Fine! But who is this Jesus for you? Be careful of your answer, *for it is eternal!* In fact, your life depends on it!

What is this business about eternal life? Why is it so hard for some to believe that we are a part of eternity? Where *did* we come from? Why are we here? Where *are* we going?

In his book The Dream of the Earth, Thomas Berry takes an interesting look at these eternal questions. Fr. Berry, who spoke years ago at ASU in nearby Boone, NC, is a Roman Catholic priest who says that we do not really believe in our own eternal life *because we have separated ourselves from Creation and, therefore, from eternity!* Citing none other than St. Thomas Aquinas, Berry concludes that "the natural world is not simply object, not simply a usable thing, not an inert mode of being awaiting its destiny to be manipulated by the divine or exploited by the human." Instead, he says, "the natural world is the larger, sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated

from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. *To damage this community (the earth) is to diminish our own existence.*" [p.81, emphasis mine]

In other words, when asked the eternal questions, many of us feel lost because we have created a death-like experience by separating ourselves from creation. We treat our world, our Earth, as if, in the words of the Old Testament, *"it will wear out like a garment."* We treat our bodies and the stuff around them like they are easily replaceable. Is it any wonder that we have a hard time with eternal questions like where, what, when and who? Likewise escaping us are the eternal answers, solutions to saving a world that is dissolving before our very eyes!

What is the answer? The answer is a realization and a revelation. The realization takes some work. We must realize and accept who we are. We are creatures who have come from God, who are here on Earth for the main purpose of honoring God *and God's creation*, and we shall return to God. This is part of the eternal answer. We are *in* eternity! We are eternity!

The revelation is the same as the one given to Peter: Jesus is the

Christ, the Son of the living God, whose *eternal task* is to deliver us from our hell-bent tendency to separate ourselves from the rest of creation.

A realization and a revelation; together they form a solid foundation of faith, an eternal rock "*and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death and separation shall not prevail against it.*" Surely, this is the eternal answer to the eternal question? If not, who do you say that he is?