

*“Who do you say that I am?”*

When the historians sit down to analyze and write about the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they will undoubtedly divide it into two sections—BC and AC. That is Before Coronavirus, BC, and After Coronavirus, AC. This segmentation will apply to all subcategories: world history, American history, Montana history, economic history, political history, and even church history. So catastrophic has been the impact of this global pandemic, that there is no aspect of life and culture that hasn't been rocked by it. And, of course, being in the midst of it as we are, it is too soon to say when it will be that we can start saying AC, After Coronavirus.

But what we can say now is that the world that we knew before this pandemic is now a time in history that will not return. Once we get beyond this crisis, life then, in many respects, will not be like life was before it.

For example, some economists are predicting that many of the jobs that were lost will not be restored after this pandemic. Many jobs will change. Companies have discovered that having their employees work from home has reduced the need for the cost of physical offices. It is likely that many jobs that moved from offices to home will remain there in the future. Related to this is the phenomenon of some remote workers relocating to places like Montana where they can work remotely for their companies located far away.

Another industry that has seen major change that will linger well into the future are the enterprises that cater to business travelers—airlines, hotels, restaurants, and convention centers. This online Zoom platform that we're using for our worship services and church meetings is the platform that many companies are using with great success and cost saving. It is quite likely that this online virtual platform will continue to be used long after it was the only way to meet.

Schools are also changing dramatically with more and more innovations being rolled out in how online and virtual platforms can be used where the resources and expertise of those in a particular location can be extended and made available to students everywhere.

When it comes to the church, it's worth pondering the changes that we're experiencing and what impact those changes have on our future.

The biggest change for us undoubtedly is our move from in-person worship to this virtual online platform. The nature of this pandemic is such that it calls for us to radically resist so many of the aspects that make the church the church.

Christian community is based on relationships. Yes, there is our personal relationship with Jesus. In addition, though, is our relationships with others who also confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. And so much of that Christian community is lived out in the presence and company of others. Physical proximity, if not physical touch, is central to this expression of our faith. That God chose to come to us in flesh, in the incarnation of Jesus, calls us to that physical expression of Christian community.

And yet here we are in a pandemic where we can have no certainty that either we ourselves may be asymptomatic with COVID-19 and unwittingly passing it along to others. Nor do we have any certainty that those in our midst are not asymptomatic spreaders of the coronavirus. Until there is medical scientific information that allows us to congregate with minimal risk, our care for one another and ourselves calls us to do exactly what the church is normally not—separated from our fellow Christians.

Now I want to be the first to say here, that I do not like this. Never in a million years did I ever aspire to or think that I would become a TV preacher or radio preacher. And yet, look at me, listen to me. You are seeing me on your screen today or hearing me on your phone today. There are only 4 people here in this sanctuary today seeing and hearing me in person. And their experience is not what it was in that each of them is hard at work to ensure that this service is available to you in this format. I would venture to say that they also never dreamed that this would be part of their church life.

That said, I have to add to this to say how fortunate we are to have this technology available to us to help us through this serious pandemic. More than once I have pondered how different it must have been for the church during the Spanish flu pandemic 100 years ago. There was no technology to allow churches to continue in any semblance of normality. There would have had to have been a total cessation of church life during that time until that pandemic passed. It would have been like the church going into hibernation.

This is all to say that as challenging and perhaps as frustrating this is for us to continue to be separated from one another, I for one am very grateful that we can stay connected and maintain our chief end according the Westminster Shorter Catechism which is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. For we are together in this medium as we worship and glorify God.

I would venture to say that we in the Christian church are at a watershed moment in the history of Christianity in that we are being called to remember and recall the essence of what it is to be church. There have been numerous watershed moments in Christian history over the last 2000 years.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic such watershed moments was the protestant reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was the period when European church leaders such as Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox were calling the church back to its fundamental identity as the people of God, called by God to live in the faith of God's forgiveness that empowers Christians to live in gratitude to God. So radical was this message at the time, that it resulted in the split of the church. Protestant churches were born out of the Roman Catholic Church. And with the innovation of the printing press and the increasing literacy of the masses, many people left the Roman Catholic Church and became part of the Protestant churches.

I need to insert an asterisk of sorts here whenever I speak of the protestant reformation. The issues and matters that led to the split between catholics and protestants have long been settled and worked out to the point today that both groups of Christians have a high regard for each other.

Another such watershed moment was when the early Christian church was born out of the early eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry . We read about this movement in the Book of Acts. It was in this early phase that Christians became more numerous and formed close covenant communities that supported and encouraged one another in living as followers of Jesus. It was these groups of early Christians that led to the formal institutionalization of the church that has continued down through the centuries to our own day.

While there are other such points in time over the course of Christian history when the church was called to remember its roots and reaffirm them, the one to which they all point is the initial event when Jesus himself established the foundation of the church when declaring that his apostle Simon is to be Peter which comes from the word for rock. This is when Jesus declared, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. . . ." (Mt. 16:18a) This declaration by Peter followed his response to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" His response, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

When we take a look at this commissioning by Jesus, Peter is a curious choice for this foundational role. Peter is that disciple who was all over the map as far as the strength of his faith in

Jesus. He is the one who was headstrong and confident, who stepped out of the boat when he saw Jesus walking on the water. But as Peter was also walking on the water while looking to Jesus, he started to sink as soon as he took his eyes off of Jesus. Peter is the one who spoke boldly on the day of Pentecost, testifying to God's love in Jesus. But Peter is also the one who denied ever knowing Jesus after Jesus was arrested and taken away. Peter is a human as they come in terms of his fluctuations in his faithfulness to Jesus.

So if it is not his faith that leads Jesus to declare that it was upon Peter that his church would be established, what was it about Peter? Presbyterian pastor Jin S. Kim writes about this very question. "The rock is not Peter, but Peter's *testimony*. Therefore, while this passage has been interpreted to give the church empirical power and permanence, the underlying lesson is that the church is as resilient or fragile as each of us in our own faith. The church exists daily in this tension of power and powerlessness. Jesus' question to each of us is, 'Who do *you* say that I am? What is *your* testimony of me? What is *your* experience of the living God through my witness and presence?'" (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A., Vol. 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2011 Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville. p. 384)

I believe that we're being called in this particular time in which we find ourselves, to renew our testimony in response to Jesus' question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" And then with our response is that of Peter's, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, then we're called to ponder those follow up questions, "What is *your* testimony of me? What is *your* experience of the living God through my witness and presence?"

In this pandemic and the limitations with which we find ourselves, we may be tempted to respond that how can I testify to Jesus and how can I experience the living God when I am so isolated and alone and separated from my fellow Christians?

As I suggested, this is likely one of those watershed moments in the history of the Christian church. How we choose to respond, how we choose to experience the living God and testify to God will be the measure of our fidelity as stewards of the church of Jesus that carries on into the future.

Again, unlike those of pandemics past, we have in our day, in this pandemic, at our disposal tools and methods of communication and connection that were merely science fiction fantasy less than a couple of decades ago.

We are being called by Jesus to testify who it is that we say Jesus is, loud and clear, using whatever methods and technologies we have available. For Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

By your very presence here today, via computer, telephone or television, you are already making that proclamation. And by our being together across the distances that physically separate us, we are bound together by our common faith and witness to Jesus who is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Now to the One  
 who by the power at work within us  
 is able to do far more abundantly  
 than all we can ask or imagine,  
 to God be glory in the church  
 and in Christ Jesus  
 to all generations, forever and ever. Amen

*Eph. 3:20, 21*