

This is one of those Gospel stories that might cause us to scratch our heads and say, “Huh?” Jesus asks his closest friends, his disciples, who they think he is. They answer by telling him what they have heard other people say, but he persists and asks, “but who do *you* say that I am?” Then, Peter gets it and says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds by telling Peter that God has revealed this to him and that Jesus will build his church on Peter the Rock. OK, we understand the point Jesus is making, that it is important who his followers believe he is. So far, so good, but then comes kind of a shock as the Gospel tells us, “Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” This is where our “huh?” comes in. He tells them to keep what they know a *secret*, to not tell anyone what they know! Really! Why?

It sounds like a glorious development! Now should be the time to call in the media, get out the word, let everybody know that the Messiah has come and is setting up his organization. Proclaim this wonderful long-awaited news not just to Israel, but to the whole world! But that is not what happened as we hear Jesus telling his friends to keep it to themselves. So, apparently it is not time for press releases, for photo opportunities, for sound bites. Far from it. It is to be something only they know. I’m pretty sure that the disciples were also saying “huh?” as they asked themselves, “If we can’t tell others this wonderful good news, then what is the point?”

Why is Jesus so intent on keeping his being the Messiah a secret? Why not let it out? And it is not just this one time in the Gospels that we are told Jesus wants his identity to stay a secret. Repeatedly, throughout the gospels, he tries to keep from becoming the talk of whatever town he’s in. Yet when he performs such deeds as healing the sick, feeding the hungry, raising the dead, when he fulfills the messianic job description, how are people expected to keep his identity to themselves? And why should they? What he does in one community after another is a publicist’s dream. The guy’s got the makings of a star. He’s going to be big, really big. Have you ever wondered about this strange little aspect of the Gospels that sneaks in every now and then? Why wouldn’t Jesus want the whole world to know about the most incredible news since the birth of Creation, the revelation of who God is, and his plan for the world?

There’s a name for everything Jesus does in an effort to pass unrecognized for who he is, the Messianic Secret. What’s behind it? If God sent his Son to reveal to the world his will and the truth of the purpose of Creation, why not yell it from the highest rooftops? Well, the most convincing explanation is that God does not want his Son to be acknowledged as the Messiah for the wrong reasons. He does not want the Messiah to be recognized outside of his death and resurrection. Only in the light of those events can people begin to recognize and understand what his being the Messiah really means. If they hear he is the Messiah before he gets to the cross, they are sure to misunderstand him and the message he brings from God the Father. Without the cross and resurrection in mind, they will see him as someone who has come to solve their problems, a Mr. Fix-It from on high. The crowds are likely to view him as a messiah sent to put them in charge, to get rid of pain and loss and disappointment, to make their lives easy and comfortable.

Jesus does not want his life and ministry to be seen in the wrong light. For this reason, he prefers that, for now, only his immediate circle must know that he is the one God has sent, but even they do not really know why. The opportunity will come later for them to announce that he is the Messiah, which they will do with all of their hearts, even at the cost of their own lives. That opportunity will come once the crucifixion takes place and he returns from death and then sends them out to tell the world. Only then will even the disciples truly understand who he is and why God sent him.

So what *is* the message of the Messiah to the world? There are two basic parts to the message, the first is not one we humans like very much. That is that there is suffering in this world. Through Jesus' life we see that even God is not exempt from suffering. There is no explanation as to *why* there is suffering, just that it is an integral part of life that every one of us will endure in some way. The Book of Job in the Old Testament deals with the age-old human desire to understand *why* there is suffering in the world, and especially why bad things happen to good people. At the end, the answer Job gets from God basically is, "I am God, you are not." In other words, that is not for us human beings to understand. We do not like that, but for now that is the answer we are going to get.

A little later in today's Gospel, Jesus reveals to the disciples for the first time the unwelcome news that he must endure suffering and death when they get to Jerusalem, but Peter will have no part of this. He refuses to accept that idea and Jesus says to the same disciple upon whom he said he would build his Church, "Get behind me Satan!" It seems time for another "huh?" Jesus goes on to explain that Peter did not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. In other words, the message of sin is to put ourselves and our own needs and comfort first. The message of the Messiah is the Great Commandment for us to sacrifice our self-centeredness, and to put God and our neighbor first.

Just like Peter, people today are also ready to misunderstand Jesus. We want, we expect, a messiah different from the one sent to us. We are not really very comfortable with the idea that the Son of God should submit to undeserved suffering and die. Nor do we like the idea of our own suffering and death. But then comes the Good News of the second part of the revelation through the resurrection of Jesus, and that is that all suffering will be redeemed, and that even death does not have the last word. How will that all work out? Not a clue. When will that happen? No idea.

While we hope for something easy, what the gospel offers us is a kind of unwelcome surprise. What does this surprise involve? First, we can know God best through this one human being, a single life where the Word becomes flesh. The gospel goes on to insist that we know him most completely not through the notable events and miracles of his life, but by his gruesome dying and his incomprehensible resurrection. Whether or not we like that, whether or not we understand that, it is what the Messiah showed us, and it is all about God's incredible and undeserved love for each and every one of us just as we are.

As has always been the case, there are plenty of versions of Jesus abroad in the world today. Some of these versions are authentic; many of them are not. What makes a version of Jesus the real thing and not human fantasy is whether or not it invariably returns us to what is most important, that he reveals divine love completely. We can welcome no Jesus without the cross. We can welcome no Jesus who remains dead. We cannot accept an easy messiah whose hands remain unwounded.

The Christian faith states that Jesus is God in person, that when he speaks it is God speaking, that what he teaches about life is the teaching of the One who created and sustains life. It asserts that he is the manifestation of ultimate reality and the demonstration of how people as creatures of God should live. Is that the truth? If not, then who cares? If yes, then what am I going to do about it? If I don't know, how will I find out? The question from Jesus for each of us is, "Who do you say that I am?" Our answer must be our own, or it is completely meaningless. Who is Jesus to *you* today, and what truth do you believe he represents?