

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.  
 Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector  
 August 27, 2023

**Scripture readings**

Isaiah 51: 1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16: 13-20

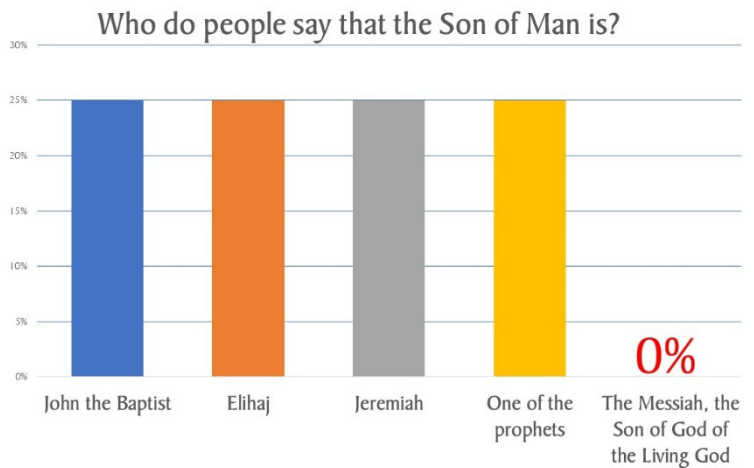
*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

I want to emphasize an aspect of the Gospel that relates us to something widespread in today's culture: polls and surveys. We do them here at St. Mary's when we want to carry out a project.

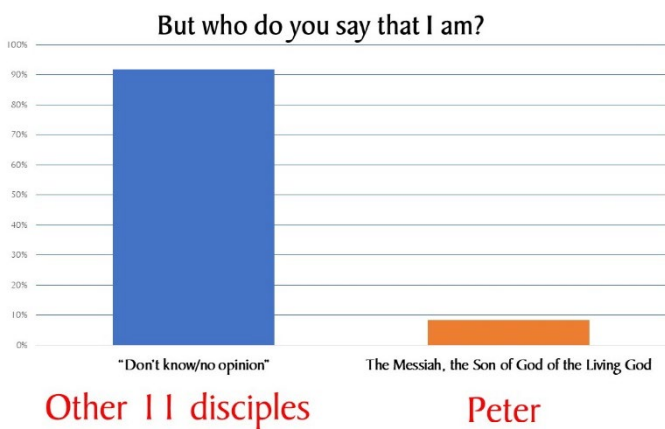
Abroad, too, especially during election time, there are polls every week on how the numbers are going for or against specific candidates. We are very familiar with answering and understanding surveys.

The great pollster in the Gospel is Jesus. He wants to get information about himself from two groups: the people and his disciples. There is something curious and wise about it that we should take note of. This survey takes place in Caesarea Philippi, a city on the northern outskirts of Israel in a pagan environment where religious leaders had little or no influence. This place offered respondents as much freedom as possible to respond without fear of what they felt and thought. It is a grand gesture that Jesus takes care of the emotions and feelings of others. He does not intend to get fabricated and forced answers. On the contrary, he wants to get them from free hearts and minds.

In the first survey, he collects the perceptions the disciples have had in contact with the people. They all speak. They know what people are saying. Their answers are divided into four groups: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, and one of the prophets. That is, 25% for each one. 0% of the people believe that Jesus is the Son of God.



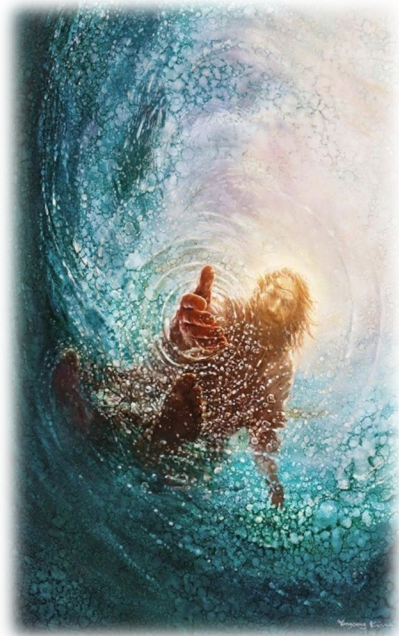
The second survey goes directly to the disciples. We can imagine the silence and their astonished face as if avoiding having been asked.



Although they shared with him daily, they were unsure who he was. Assuming there were 12 disciples, the results would be as follows: 11 don't know, no opinion, equivalent to 92%. And only one, Peter, knows who Jesus is, equal to 8%. Statistically, some rather bleak results for Jesus, precisely because the disciples would have already witnessed several events that indicated the identity of Jesus. Let's see why.

Recall that two weeks ago, when Michael preached about his experience in a small boat in Katchemak Bay, off the coast of Homer, Alaska, the Gospel ended with the following: "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Last week, Reverend Dawn told us about the Canaanite woman, and she called Jesus using the expression Son of David, a title referring to his messianic character.

That is, the disciples had already been familiar with Peter's confession. But why would it be that Peter was the only one who was sure who Jesus was?



Peter did not doubt because he had experienced Jesus as God. He already felt him as his savior. Let's go back again to a gospel episode two weeks ago. Jesus took him to a dimension beyond the laws of physics we know: walking on water. Until today, only two people are known to walk on water: Jesus and the short walk of Peter. He could not forget a fact of such a dimension so easily. He, too, could not forget that Jesus reached out to him when he was sinking, any more than our friends Michael and Nancy could forget their experience in the boat in Katchemak Bay. How could we forget when his unconditional love saves us?

Therefore, Peter knew for sure that the power of Jesus was the power of God. When asked, Who do you say that I am? Peter answers without hesitation: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus exalts him, letting others know that this can only come from a person who has experienced God and carries him in his heart in an intimate relationship. So Jesus, under this reality, tells him: based on what you say, I will found my church. And nothing can end it.

Dear brothers and sisters, this Jesus question is for us, too. He asks us: Who do you say that I am? What is my answer? If we remember how God works in our lives, I'm sure the answer goes in the same direction as Peter.

We are here after two millennia because we have experienced salvation from the Son of the living God. This community of St. Mary's is proof of that. Although, like the other disciples, sometimes we do not know how to respond, Jesus is never disappointed in us, just as he did with Peter after the three-time denials; he did not condemn, criticize, or judge him. On the contrary, he welcomed, included, valued, consoled, encouraged, and trusted him again to be the apostles' leader. That's how it is; Jesus will not give up on us under any circumstances. He is giving us his hand. Let us continue accepting his unique and unconditional love. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

