

Had It Not Been for the Lord **Psalm 124; Matthew 16:13-20**

Our Bible reading today from the Gospel of Matthew suggests that Jesus was taking a step-back moment in his life and ministry; A pause; A time of evaluation.

He had been traveling with the disciples. Teaching. Listening. Reaching out to people. A divine energy was being released into the world through him. An energy that included passion for justice; Healing and compassion for all people; Acceptance for the unacceptable. Yes, something special was happening in the life of Jesus. Yet even when good things are happening, it's important, if not essential, to step back every now and then to ask: What is really happening? Where have I been? Where do I want to go? What is my life all about?

In a similar way, Jesus begins asking the disciples step-back questions. He asks: "What are people saying about me?" The disciples begin rattling off the results of the most recent public opinion poll: "A certain percentage of people say that you are John the Baptist, or at least are like John the Baptist. And some think you're the second coming of the great prophet Elijah. And still others believe you're stern and austere like Jeremiah or one of the great prophets from our tradition. In other words, Jesus, people are beginning to put you on the Mount Rushmore of Jewish prophets! You're really making a name for yourself. You're really going places, Jesus. Isn't that fantastic?"

How easy it would have been to stop there. Jesus was trending and going viral and lighting up social media in his first-century world. It all looked so positive. What more could he have wanted? Yet, Jesus wasn't taking a poll. Jesus was trying to take the disciples to a deeper place. And that's why he turned to them and asked a more penetrating question. He said: "But who do *you* say that I am?" That's when Peter, always impetuous, always ready with a quick answer, that's when Peter said: "You are the Messiah / the Christ / the Son of the living God."

And in a way he was right. The words were right. But then Jesus asks him to tell no one. Why? Why does Jesus silence a perfectly good answer?

Well, it's a puzzle, to be sure, but I think it suggests that you can say the right theological words, but that doesn't guarantee you have the right theological content, because after you say the words, you then have to understand the meaning of them. When it comes to faith, meaning is everything.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the *Christ*? This word, "Christ" which means "anointed one", what does it actually mean when added to the name Jesus? And what does Jesus the anointed one really mean?

Psalm 124 reads, "If the Lord had not been on our side... Then the raging waters would have engulfed us... Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

Had it not been for the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the three in One, what would have happened to us...to you and to me...to all humanity?

Have you ever thought of it? Each morning as I sit and pray for all those on our prayer list, for each of you in our congregation, for friends and family, I ask God's blessings for healing, for compassion, and for care and I give thanks for the prayers that are answered each and every day.

And yet, I still stand in awe of the prayers that God continually answers. I can honestly say the words of the Psalmist, using my own situation. Had it not been for the Lord, I would not be here today, having survived cancer. Had it not been for the Lord, I would not be here today, having survived domestic violence. Had it not been for the Lord, I would not be here today, having answered God's call on my life at the age of 45.

How do you finish the Psalmist sentence? Had it not been for the Lord, I... Each of us can complete that statement in a different way because each of us has a story that connects our life with God in a very real and personal way, yet no two are the same.

This week I experienced a miracle...not the first miracle I have experienced, which is why I continue to wonder why I am always awed and surprised when I experience the wanders of God's presence.

Throughout Phyl Abbott's hospital stay, we have tried to keep you apprised of her condition, asking for prayers along the way. I believe that prayer is a powerful and life-changing tool. I believe that churches and families can be changed when they nurture a healthy prayer life.

On Wednesday Phyl was in the ER at Thomasville and was not alert, sleeping most of the time, unable to respond to people who spoke to her. Though obviously in a great deal of pain, the medical team indicated they could not give her anything for pain due to the lethargy. Barb and I sat by her bed and were concerned that she seemed not to be responding. Barb held one hand, and I the other as I prayed, asking God to lay his hand of healing upon Phyl, to give her clarity of mind, and to relieve her pain, allowing the medical team to treat her in the way needed to allow her to mend and to heal. After the prayer Barb went back to work and I stayed with Phyl.

In a matter of minutes Phyl became more responsive! We began to converse. Her daughter called and I held the phone for Phyl to speak to her. In 30 minutes things turned around!

Had it not been for the Lord.... What is your story? How would you complete this sentence...Had it not been for the Lord I....