

“You Are...”
A sermon by Angie Witmer
Plymouth UCC
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“Do not be afraid, I am with you.

I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will lead you home. I love you and you are mine.” --David Haas (from the song “You Are Mine”)

Most of the people I know have vivid memories of watershed moments in their lives—times when they recognize that nothing will be the same from that point on. Often the memories of those moments are seared permanently on our minds—we can pull them up and experience them as if they happened only yesterday. There are, of course, the big turning points of life that leave an impression—wedding days, the birth of a child, sending your kids off to school for the first time. Those moments are often planned, orchestrated, choreographed, videotaped, captured somehow for the scrapbook to be pulled out and re-lived later on. Good times.

But those aren't the moments I'm thinking about today. I'm thinking more about those unexpected, life changing moments that catch you by surprise that can't possibly be caught on film because there's no way to prepare for them. They just sort of happen before you know it, without warning, and you find yourself stunned and scratching your head wondering what just happened, knowing in your gut that life can't possibly be the same anymore but you have no idea how things will play out. Those moments may not be able to be captured on Kodachrome (or Facebook) but they can be brought up in an instant when a certain sight, smell or sound brings it all back in a hurry...which is exactly what happens for me when I hear the song we just sang (“You Are Mine” by David Haas).

It was 1997. I was at a pastoral musician's conference at the Hyatt Hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On this particular day, I was seated in the back row in a beige carpeted, beige walled windowless conference room with about 100 other folks. Funny how the details are so clear in these memories, huh? Anyway, we were all there to hear David Haas—the guy who wrote this song. He was leading a workshop on music and worship, which is exactly what I had come to learn—how to do music and worship really, really well. I was excited and ready to go: pen and paper in hand like a kid on her first day of school. He came into the room wearing a T-shirt and jeans, introduced himself and laid out what we would be doing in our time together: designing worship using music and prayers and scripture that weave together. Just hearing him describe what we would be learning and doing in our hour and a half together got me even more excited. I couldn't wait! After the opening formalities, David moved to the Yamaha grand piano in the front of the room, sat down and played a few keys. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I hadn't planned to start with this one, but right now it feels like the best way to enter into our time together. If you know this, feel free to sing along...” And with that, he shut his eyes and started singing, “I will come to you in the silence...” Some people did start to sing. But I couldn't because the truth of the words of this song had somehow taken my breath and my voice away. All I could do was sit there with tears streaming down my cheeks and a big smile on my face as I felt the truth of what I had heard in stories and in songs and in Bible studies and in sermons for years settle into my heart. God calls us and claims us and lifts us from our fears. Jesus makes the blind to see and gives those who are lame the power to walk again. In that moment, I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he really is the Word who brings all to freedom. And at the very core of my being first, last, and always, always, always a child of God. We all are. For whatever reason, in that moment, in that song, in that conference room the cogs all fell into place. All of the information that was so nicely and neatly stored away as fun facts in my brain moved to my heart and became life-giving wisdom. The room was suddenly full of color. And I knew that something

had changed...I just didn't know how or why. But something had shifted in me that would change my life forever.

I'd like to say that after having experienced that vivid, watershed moment I became one of those really holy, amazingly enlightened, Jesus-y people. You know, the kind of person who always knows the right thing to say, who has limitless compassion and patience and oozes wisdom and light from every pore of their being. OK—I'm with you. I don't personally know anyone like that, either. But it's who I thought I should be after the light bulb went off. Truth is, I left that conference just as human as ever. I was highly disappointed that I was unable to walk on water from that moment on. I was—and still am—fully human and amazingly capable of (as Anne Lamott so beautifully puts it) making Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.

Case in point: just last year I'm in another beige colored conference room (are all conference rooms beige???) with different people in a different city to discuss a different topic. But the setup is about the same. We're all there to be enlightened and I'm really, really excited about how all of this new information is going to make me a better person, preacher, teacher, mom, wife, friend, colleague, human being. The conference started with group intros and mine was very brief and to the point: "Hey everybody. I'm Angie Witmer from Des Moines, Iowa. I'm married. I'm a mom. And I'm a minister. That's pretty much me—I'm sure you'll learn more as the week goes on."

The next morning there were six of us sitting at the breakfast table getting to know a little more about each other. We have about five minutes before our morning session starts when one of the guys at the table takes the last bite of his eggs, points his fork at me and says, "So...you're a minister?" "Yeah." "Of what?" "Ummm...what???" "I mean, Christian? Not Christian? Are you in a church or something?" "Oh, yeah—I'm in a great church. Plymouth Congregational UCC. Love it. I absolutely love it." "Why?" "Why do I love it? Well, there's confirmation and worship and this thing called Stepping Stones..." (at this point I was very excited—nothing gets me going like talking about why I love my job...) "No, not why do you love it. Why are you a minister? You seem pretty cool...but church? I don't get it. What do you believe?" "Well, the UCC is a great denomination. It believes..." "Uh...I didn't ask you what your church believes. I asked what you believe. Do you really believe all of that church-y, Jesus-y stuff?"

Right then and there, at 7:58 a.m. (two minutes before our first session was to begin, by the way) on a beautiful Monday morning, my mouth went bone dry. My heart rate shot up. My throat clenched shut. It felt like I was back in school and the teacher called on me without any warning. I found myself wanting to tell this guy—and everyone else at the table—exactly what I thought about church and Jesus: that I love it all and that this really is an amazing place and when you jump into it and let yourself go with it, this church stuff really does change your life. For the better.

But in that moment, all I could do was try and think of the "right" answer. My brain quickly took over the situation and started thinking of books to recommend (should he read Marcus Borg? Or maybe some Barbara Brown Taylor? Maybe Rob Bell would be more of his liking...hmmm...). And my brain kept spinning for what seemed like hours: what could I say that wouldn't make me look like a complete geek and church nerd? It was our first full day, after all. I wanted to make a good impression. Make friends. Not turn people away. I was stuck and keenly aware that when faith gets personal (as it should) it feels incredibly vulnerable and risky.

And that's what I imagine that group of disciples was feeling when Jesus posed the question to them. If you flip back in your bulletins and re-read the scripture, you'll note that they were all willing and eager to chime in on Jesus' "Who do others say I am?" question. They were chirping like birds offering him up the beat on the street: Elijah. John the Baptist. Jeremiah. Some other great prophet. But that wasn't the question Jesus was really interested in. What he really wanted to know from this group of guys was, "Who do you say that I am?" He makes it personal.

Because, let's face it: this is personal stuff. Honestly, I could stand up here and talk all day...but this is only my opinion. Ultimately what I have to offer you this morning or what David Ruhe has to offer or Matt or Anthony or Tristan or any of clergy around here is just a jumping off point. What matters is what you think. Who is Jesus? What do you believe?

Anyway, when Jesus poses the question to the group, I imagine they did what I did when posed the question by my friend: they fell silent, stared off into space or down at the ground, throats tightening, mouths dry, hearts racing, brains searching for the right answer.

The story doesn't tell us how long that awkward pause in the action lasted, but I can feel the relief of the rest of the group when Peter piped up and broke the silence with his response: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

Whew. Thank God for Peter. He is always at the first of the line jumping in, stepping out of the boat, following Jesus, offering his opinion. Some folks say that Peter's way of being in the world is brave or courageous. Others folks believe that Peter is reckless in what he says and does. Either way, in this story his method and his answer are evidently what Jesus was looking for because the next thing you know, Peter is the rock on which the church will be built and he's given the keys to the kingdom.

Huh. Peter. Of all people. He sank when he tried to walk on water. And yes, he always seemed to have something to say when Jesus posed a question, but he wasn't exactly the kind of guy who stood his ground when things got a little uncomfortable. In today's story, Jesus tells Peter "you are the rock on which I will build my church..." but a few sentences later Jesus is calling him Satan and a stumbling block because Peter has trouble remembering who Jesus is and what Jesus is all about. And don't forget—a few chapters later, Peter will out and out deny ever knowing Jesus at all. "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" will only be a mere memory at that point.

But it will still be a memory. A vivid one permanent etched into his mind, his heart and his soul because the moment we are witness to here today is one of those watershed moments for Peter, for the disciples and even for Jesus. Right there, far from home in Caesarea Phillipi, Jesus gets a little glimmer of hope from someone as unlikely as Peter. Peter's answer wasn't memorized. It wasn't regurgitated from what he heard someone else say. It was from his heart. For Peter, in that instant the cogs fell into place, things lined up, and Peter knew in his heart and mind and soul that this guy they were traveling with had called and claimed him. He could make the blind see and give the lame the power to walk again. He could feed 5000 people with a little bit of nothing and he could calm the storm. Peter saw it all as if for the first time—what other answer could he give but "You are the Son of the living God?" It was true. His heart was on fire. And by sharing his insight with everyone, the rest of the group had to have been moved by the exchange they witnessed between Jesus and Peter. To say it was touching would be a gross understatement. It was beautiful. Jesus was so stirred by Peter's heartfelt answer that all he knew to do was offer the highest of praise: you get it. And because you get it, people will be drawn to you. You are going to build the church. And nothing—absolutely nothing—will stop you from succeeding.

Petros. That's what Jesus calls him. A stone. A pebble. A small piece of a bigger rock. A chip off the old block. (thanks, Barbara Brown Taylor for that image).

Peter is not profound. He's not really even a deep thinker. He's far from perfect. Actually, he's pretty stubborn, bold, vulnerable and fully human. He is chosen and named by Jesus. By God. Which is what makes this story a story of hope and promise for all of us: if this is the guy on whom the church is built, then there is hope for each of us. Peter is our reminder that being blessed isn't about being perfect. Being blessed is being ourselves and showing up for our lives with open hearts and curious minds and a willingness to be vulnerable.

“What do you believe?” “Who do you say Jesus is?” Those are the questions of the day. Actually, those are the questions of a lifetime. The next time someone asks you either one of those questions—and let’s face it, there will be a time when someone will ask—channel your inner Peter. Not the denying Jesus Peter. But the one who is curious and bold and takes risks. Try and tell the person asking the question whatever it is you feel at that moment. Sure, you might babble on. And you might sound silly. But you might not. Your answer just might surprise you. What if what you have to say is something that could change someone’s life? What if your willingness to share whatever you feel in that moment opens something up in someone? What if you sharing your story becomes a vivid memory for someone? It could happen you know. Peter isn’t the only chip off the old block. So are you. And on you, the church continues to grow...

Amen.

p.s.: Just so you know, when my heart rate slowed and saliva came back into my mouth, I looked my new friend in the eye and said: “Yes. I do believe this church-y, Jesus-y stuff. If you’d like to know some more about why I love it and believe in it, I’d be glad to tell you sometime.” No dissertation was necessary. I didn’t have to quote sources or give a lecture. All the question needed was a simple answer...and that simple answer started up a conversation that is still going on today. You just never know when those watershed moments are going to happen...