My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Jesus is teaching the Twelve. And he asks them, who am I? Who do you say that I am? What is my name?

Do you remember the Name Game? It was a popular hit record by Shirley Ellis back when we were all growing up, and for some names it was pretty good, and others didn’t work so well. Take my name—Mark. Let’s put that into the song: Mark, mark, bo-bark, banana-fana fo-fark, fi-fi-mo-mark: Mark. It just doesn’t work. C’mon, let’s all do that kind of silently with our own names…or out loud…(wait while we do this). Not bad. So when Jesus asks us his question: who do YOU say that I am? I know a great many folks that are just afraid to answer. Or they try and get out of it altogether wondering if they’ll offend the Lord our God. The first time I realized this was actually a question in the Gospel, I put Jesus into the name game to break the tension in the room.

Jesus, Jesus, bo-beezus, banana-fana fo-feezus, fe-fi-mo-meezus: Jesus. Everyone got a good laugh, and I successfully deflected attention from ever having to really answer this question in earnest.

And that’s OK, our God likes us to have fun, and even Jesus gets the name-game treatment. I didn’t know. Just like our disciples. And they totally confused by Jesus’ saying he had to suffer and die. So Jesus and Peter get into it in a pretty heated discussion.

Now, Jesus had done a bunch of really good stuff—teaching, healing, explaining, and the disciples believed that he was the fore-runner of the Messiah. Anticipation was building for that coming presence. But they didn’t quite go all in for Jesus as fulfillment of that anticipation. We all have an image of the coming Messiah, don’t we? And think on that. Whatever THIS Jesus is, to date, before the crucifixion, he doesn’t quite fit that image. And that difference between what we want, as disciples, and what a person really is gives us a kind of get-out-of-jail free card. It’s much easier to believe that an even more powerful Messiah WILL come, later, rather than already has come as the person who we see here. Who looks like us, from a small town no one has heard of, and who isn’t an important temple presence like Elijah. It’s why we believe so deeply in Jesus coming again on a throne of glory and throwing folks who don’t make the cut into the Lake of Fire, just like Revelation might say. The Messiah of right now doesn’t look capable of any of that.

But Messiahs of the future keep our fantasies intact. An ideal image of someone that far distant in time and place makes no demands of us right here, right now. *We can just keep putting off* real commitment to change not just **ourselves**, but also change our idealized Messiah to what Jesus means for us *right here, right now*.

So the crowds, an allegory for the world, will just not change, because things are pretty good when we have money, status, power, possessions making us feel good—why give any of that up? Giving that up would mean that we have to let go of our childhood, or adult, fantasy and idealizations about Jesus, the powerful magician, who can fix the bad stuff when it’s bad and leave us alone otherwise.

Changing our image of God might actually change our faith, and those resulting answers and demands might actually alter our lives.

But Peter has done some reflection since he began following Jesus. He makes it clear the disciples differ from the crowds in their view of Jesus: he gets it, Jesus is the Messiah. Do we remember Jesus’ response? He neither denies nor affirms this first confession of faith. In the Gospel of Mark, neither we, nor the disciples, can understand Jesus prior to the crucifixion. Put another way, until we see God entering into our suffering and our lives as one of the underprivileged and undervalued, we can’t proclaim Jesus as Messiah. And the disciples don’t see this for sure, and so they can’t apply it to Jesus either.

We say we see God in everything. But do we see God AS one of ourselves, AS someone we encounter, whether we like them or not? Or is Jesus still this future, far-away presence, a Christ too polite to intervene and shake up our lives, too far from reach to help us right in this place? In us, through us, with us? Jesus is more than just a kind teacher, peasant leader, and passionate prophet.

What does it mean for Jesus to be the light of the world, and for US to be that light as well, as vessels of divine grace, promise, and purpose?

Jesus makes this very clear to his friends. He must suffer, be rejected, crucified, overcome earthly death to be able to enter into us fully so that God’s work can be done. The very human Peter says, “No, this can’t happen! We won’t let it and don’t you go there, Jesus, talking about your death! You might just bring it on with that kind of talk!” This is an impossible image of the Messiah, for them, isn’t it? It would be for us, too, someone who talks of their death rather than vengeance on an unjust world. This new image Jesus was giving didn’t mesh with their expectation. Nor, if we’re honest does it mesh with our image either, does it? We give lip service to the suffering servant, but do we really believe and embrace it?

God plays with the post-resurrection presence here that we know so well. Our God says, “no, YOU don’t define me. You can’t control me in how and where I appear; I am everywhere, and nowhere. I am a presence that will never die, but to get there I had to die.” Well, that’s perfectly clear, isn’t it? The Satan language in this passage represents God’s total frustration of the disciples and us trying to control the Spirit which blows where it will. To accept God in all fullness, we have to let go our suppositions that God is this and not that, here but not there.

So on this Sunday when we contemplate our future as a church, who is Jesus to us? There’s lots to worry about out in the world—wars, coronavirus, economic woes, the environment and climate change—but are we called to tuck in and save ourselves?

We talked about engagement and withdrawal over the summer, and how both are needed to build the Kingdom. But ultimately we have to engage to build our future, to be a witness to openness, love, trust, and a beacon of being unafraid in present circumstances.

We agree that we are a church of mission: let’s start with the small thing we’re doing today and this week. We open our doors, and invite the world in. We have to get used to being together again as friends, as a church, as Greenlanders. And if we can help spur a sense of being and gathering that is not just tolerance but acceptance, we will be fulfilling the Gospel. That Gospel which asks us to name Jesus, in terms of all that we know about our God.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Who do we say Jesus is? Not the theological answer. Jesus wants to know who do each of you, and I, and we, say that he is to us? For my part, playing the name game with Jesus just won’t cut it anymore. It’s time to take that question seriously. And in the spirit of love that knows no bounds, or walls, or belongs to any one of us, putting our energies into opening our doors once in a while and running a coffee house a few hours a day each week is a pretty good start. And it just might lead to something bigger than all of us, more than we can imagine.

Let’s find out together.

Thanks be to God, Amen.