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Shaped Into The Rock

I take Lady Bug, our beagle, on walks every day and we follow a very familiar pattern. We go around a particular block at least once a day, sometimes more. I think I've gotten used to the surroundings and the various landmarks along the way. Even down to the shrubs and trees that accompany us on our walks. But then it happened. I could have sworn that it was a cat sitting underneath a bush. So, I started walking a little slower wondering when it was going to run away when it realized that Lady Bug was walking towards it. As we stepped closer I realized it wasn't a cat at all. It was a rock. From a distance they were easily mistaken for each other.

Can you spot an imitation? A Deepfake? An image, video, or audio clip that has been completely generated by Artificial intelligence? They are becoming more and more common especially in politics and current events. It's not real but literally artificial. How do we distinguish between them? I'm sure many of us have come across something online that seemed compelling, even beautiful until we realized it was not taken or written by a human being, but by a computer. Then the reaction becomes mixed/complicated. Somewhere in Chicago, one project director spent her summer wondering if she's been working with a human or a bot. That's how a story from this past Thursday began. The article continues, "AI's rise at work is putting many workers on edge: Roughly 1 in 5 workers say it makes them feel like their job is less secure, and some 1 in 3 are more pessimistic about the current job market because of it." Our world is filled with conversations about the real vs. the artificial and technology, social media, and AI are just the start. We crave something real, not surface level or superficial.

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? The answers are as numerous as ever. Our world is filled with countless answers. More than we could count. There is Jesus the conqueror, the warrior ready to smite his enemies, the partisan politico, the uncontroversial spiritual guide, and of course, the Jesus who seems to share our own life goals and ideas of success and power. The disciples' answers seem closer. John the Baptist, Moses, Elijah, one of the prophets. Jesus rephrases-- who do you say that I am?

Peter with inspired clarity- you are the messiah, God's anointed one, the son of the living God. His answer now is given to him as pure gift. Nothing he would come up with on his own. It comes from outside himself. Jesus says as much. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven.

Left on our own we would not seek or design a savior (or a God) like this. Jesus goes on to say that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against a community shaped by this word. Mostly because Jesus himself has already been there. Every single hellish place and grave. That's who he is and will always be. The answer is fleshed out in what Jesus does. There are counterfeits and then there is the crucified one. God who is always in motion. Moving in your direction. The answer for us is the one who comes all the way down. Jesus is the fully human one who is fully God all at the same time. All the real joy and sorrow we carry Jesus bears in his body. He goes to the depths to show in word and deed that there is nowhere we will go where he has not already been. There he waits for us with arms outstretched. Already holding on to us he will never let us go. Wherever and however you have experienced hell, disconnection, loss, or death Jesus joins you there. You are never alone. He does not flinch or turn away. When everyone has left you-- there Christ remains. You might say "like a rock."

His real presence will traverse every twist and turn on this broken and beautiful journey until he runs headlong into a cross. There he shares in our own death just as we share in his. Those idols of success and power, counterfeits, can finally be crucified and buried. From the other side he raises each of us to new life. Our future can go beyond our own agendas and expectations. Shaped by the rock and shaped into the rock. Risen again he gives away forgiveness and mercy and still stands with unconditional love. Now he runs headlong towards you bringing you those same gifts.

Now we know who he is. We've seen him in action. Not counterfeits but the crucified one. The good news comes into sharper focus. Do you see it? Even more important than being able to articulate the right answer about who he is, is that Jesus himself first knows who we are. He speaks our true name and calls us friend. Beloved child of God. Sinner saved by grace alone. Forever found and included. Named and claimed in your flesh and bone. The answers to who we are can be extensive, exhausting, and confounding. Whatever AI or anyone else might say about you- know this: The one who knows you better than you know yourself, and who shaped the planets and hung the stars, is the one who sees you, and will not forget you, and gives himself to you again. His real presence for your real presence. Nothing fake or phoney or for profit here. Just gift all the way. Beginning to end and every stop in the middle.

What do we do then with this whole building the church and gates of hell stuff? Once you've been there it loses its power. It's not about triumphalism or victory over enemies. Remember the answer is the cross. Not counterfeits but the crucified one. It's about joining our savior among the lost and forsaken. Fellow beggars. Giving away mercy like bread. Imagining what resurrection might look like when we realize those counterfeits have all been emptied of their power.

Who do you say that I am? Together we can share who he has been for us in our time of need-- shepherd, refuge, shelter, healer, clarity amid the chaos, peace amid the storms, rock in a weary land, and so much more.