

**ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH
COBLESKILL NY**

August 21, 2011 – PENTECOST 10A / PROPER 16

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker, FHC

Sermon: *“Preventing Identity Theft”*

Isaiah 51:1-6	(God’s salvation is for eternity)
Psalms 138	(Give thanks to the Lord, His love endures forever)
Romans 11:33-36	(Praise for the riches and wisdom of God)
St. Matthew 16:13-20	(Whom do we say Jesus is?)

“I’ve lost everything!” she cried. “My money, my credit cards, my driver’s license, Social Security card. Now I can’t even get on a plane and go home.” This distraught young woman from Arizona was visiting friends in Schoharie County last week and had chosen to enroll her daughter in our Vacation Bible School. That evening, the mother had gone with her friends to a bar in Middleburgh, where she was robbed of her wallet. Not only did she lose \$300 in cash, her very identity had been stolen. What was she going to do? She was correct that in our post-9/11 world, the airline would not allow her to fly home, without identification.

This woman’s plight reminded me of a 1995 movie, “The Net.” Sandra Bullock plays Angela Bennett, a computer software engineer who finds out about a rogue program designed to hack into and sabotage American industry and banking.

While Angela is away on vacation, mysterious enemies change every electronic file that defines her identity: Her credit cards, bank accounts, driver’s license, employment record, homeowner’s deed, birth certificate, Social Security data, even her name, are all deleted or altered. And new files—such as a criminal record and bankruptcy documents are created. The plot revolves around Angela’s desperate quest to prove she is who she says she is—and, of course, to catch the bad guys.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus addresses the issue of His identity, asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). Their answers include “John the Baptist” (returned from the dead); or an appearance of “Elijah,” “Jeremiah,” or another Old Testament prophet. “But,” Jesus wants to know, “who do you say I am?” Back then, people didn’t have computerized records, photo IDs, birth certificates, Social Security numbers, or driver’s licenses. Most Israelites were identified by their parentage or hometown, such as “Simon, son of Jonah,” or “Mary of Bethany.” That was enough.

There’s a joke going around clergy circles about three pastors—a Lutheran, a Roman Catholic, and an Episcopalian—who end up at the gates of heaven. It’s St. Peter’s day off, so Jesus is administering the entrance exam. “The question is simple,” He says. “Who do you say that I am?”

The Lutheran pipes up, “The Bible says ...” but Jesus interrupts. “I know what the Bible says; who do *you* say I am?” The Lutheran responds, “I don’t know,” and falls through the trap door ... to that other place.

The Catholic steps forward and begins, “The Pope says ...” but Jesus interrupts him, too. “I don’t care what the Pope says; who do *you* say I am?” “I’m not sure,” the priest answers, and promptly falls through the trap door.

Jesus then turns to the Episcopalian and asks, “Who do *you* say I am?” The priest replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” But just as Jesus is smiling and gesturing for the Pearly Gates to be opened wide, the Episcopalian continues, “On the other hand ...”¹

All joking aside, Jesus' question to His disciples 2,000 years ago is the same question He asks each of us, today. Our faith, hope, and daily practice all depend on whether "worthy is the Lamb" to receive our worship, show us the meaning of love, and to guide our lives toward heaven.²

Peter affirms that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"—even though, ironically, he would later deny that he knew Jesus at all. But how do we, this moment, in Cobleskill, New York, know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Well, we have hundreds of witnesses to His life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Some of these handed down to us the Scriptures that testify about Jesus.

Even so, with all the biblical evidence, unless the Holy Spirit reveals to us that Jesus is the third person of the Trinity, and Lord of all—as He did to Peter, and Paul—we cannot know His identity.

In Jesus' time, people were continually questioning who He was and by what authority He taught and healed, cast out demons and raised the dead. Rather than call attention to His person, parentage, ancestors, or hometown, Jesus preferred to be known by His good works, the miracles with which He blessed people daily. In John 10:38 (NIV), Jesus declares: "Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

Jesus also said that we will be known by our good works—or, our failure to do them. In Matthew, Chapter 7, Christ warns against false prophets, saying that one will recognize them not by their words or ideas, but by their "fruits" or works (7:16). James goes further, insisting that "faith by itself, if it has no works is dead" (2:17, emphasis added), and Titus 1:16 (NIV) complains about people who "claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable," he says, "disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."

In today's Gospel, Peter's answer is of course, the rock-solid one on which the Christian Church was founded, and still stands. Yet sadly, people seldom turn to the Church any more for answers of any kind. Here in the West, the Church's power of persuasion is waning and her structures fracturing. We live in a culture where answers to "who is Jesus?" are numerous, wide-ranging and downright wacky—that is, among people who've even heard Jesus' name or are interested in His identity at all.

But we who continue to teach, preach, and live by Peter's confession of Christ as Lord can still make a difference. As the pillars of traditional society crumble around us, it is our individual witness to the Christ of the Bible that becomes starkly visible to the searching eye. We are Christ's witnesses, each and every one of us. If Matthew teaches that Jesus' identity as God incarnate is to be confessed, then this truth is to be confessed and demonstrated by every heart and tongue, in every place and time.³ If we fail to do this, we will have committed identity theft. We will have stolen the identity of Our Lord. People will not know who He is.

You'll be glad to learn that after all of our VBS kids and leaders prayed hard for that young mother to find her wallet, it was returned to her. Of course, the cash was missing, but she still had all the credit cards and documents to prove she is who she is, and could travel home to Arizona. In the movie, "The Net," Angela solves the mystery, gets her life back, and the bad guys are taken down. Happy endings to these two stories, but identity theft remains a serious problem in our postmodern society. However, more serious than losing our Social Security card or driver's license would be our failure to confess Christ as Lord, and to live each day of our lives as though we truly believe this, in all that we say and do. Amen.

¹ Adapt. Isabel Anders, "Peter's Confession of Christ," *Synthesis – Proper 16, Year A* (Boyd's MD: Brunson Publishing, 2011), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*