

13th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12 and Matthew 16:13-20

August 23, 2026

A folk adage describes how our prayer lives develop over time: First, you talk and God listens. Then God talks and you listen. Finally, no one talks, and you both listen.

Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12 and Matthew 16:13-20 speak to the ways God is revealed to us and to God's desire for us to connect deeply enough to hear what God is trying to tell us. Learning to discern God's voice is one of the greatest challenges of a faithful life because God communicates in so many ways: through prayer and inspiration, through Scripture and through our fellow human beings — often those we would least expect to serve as God's messengers.

In Isaiah 51, the prophet shares God's profound encouragement, reminding the people who they are and what God has promised them. Three times the people are charged: "Listen to me, you who pursue justice" (v. 1); "Listen to me, my people" (v. 4); and "Listen to me, you who know righteousness" (v. 7). Each charge is followed by examples of God's guidance, justice and deliverance. It is understandable that the people, suffering near the end of the Babylonian exile, might feel that God had stopped listening. Through the prophet, however, God calls out, assuring them that God has never stopped hearing their cries. In fact, God yearns for them to listen in return.

In Psalm 138, the psalmist echoes the benefits of remaining in conversation with God: "On the day I called, you answered me; you increased my strength of soul" (v. 3). Amid our praise and thanksgiving, God not only hears but responds, drawing close to those who are at their lowest and most in need of reassurance and grace.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that God also communicates through our gifts and callings. Each of us is meant to grow into the fullness of who God created us to be: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (v. 6). Vocational discernment is another challenge of faith because our call may lead us to a particular career or a specific way of serving our community. Sometimes we are invited to take on more than we can handle, especially in churches, where there always seems to be a need for more volunteers, deacons and elders. Yet God does not desire our exhaustion or burnout. Faithful discernment requires us to listen carefully for God’s call so we know when to say “no.”

Matthew 16:13-20 demonstrates why careful listening is essential for people of faith. Jesus first asks his followers, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Then he asks, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus tells him that this insight came not from human beings but from God. Peter’s seeming reward for listening carefully is to become the foundation — the rock — of Christ’s church. To my mind, however, Peter could recognize who Jesus was, what Jesus taught and why this message was so desperately needed because he had listened so faithfully.

All around us today are people proclaiming allegiance to a version of Jesus I do not recognize — a version that supports war, nationalism or White supremacy. The simple question, “**Who do you say that I am?**” has never felt more important. Like Peter, our ability to answer depends entirely on how carefully we attend to Jesus’ voice through the Holy Spirit.

In [Slow Theology: Eight Practices for Resilient Faith in a Turbulent World](#), authors A.J. Swoboda and Nijay Gupta write, “Prayer should be marked more by presence than requests. When the sole purpose of one’s prayer life becomes minimized to requests for things, it begins to lose its power and vitality.” Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12 and Matthew 16:13-20 push us further, suggesting that **when all we do is talk, our relationship with God remains one-sided and undeveloped. God implores us to listen — not only to break through the noise of our human world, but because God longs to be a full partner in the conversation.**

Questions for reflection for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

1. How does God's voice sound to you? When have you heard God most clearly — in prayer, through Scripture or through someone else?
2. What is the greatest source of "noise" in your life? How do you create enough quiet for God's voice to break through?
3. How would you answer if Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?"