

Who is Jesus?

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church Pastor David Labuhn

The Gospel reading for this morning from Mark 8 is right in the middle of the shortest of the four Gospels. There are only 16 chapters in the Gospel of Mark and this reading is in the 8th chapter. This is the turning point of the Gospel of St. Mark. Up to this point, St. Mark writes about the teaching, miracles, and healing that Jesus performs, but from this point on St. Mark focuses on the path to Jerusalem and Jesus' bitter sufferings and death. The rest of the Gospel focuses on the passion of Jesus. Chapter 11 (3 chapters from this describes the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem - Palm Sunday).

For Jesus, this is the turning point too. It is the winter before His Passion. He now must turn His face to Jerusalem and His death, and He also needs to prepare His disciples for what is to come. Jesus has completed His ministry in Galilee and now takes His disciples into Gentile and pagan territory away from the crowds that have been thronging to Him.

The location He has chosen is around the village of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is about 30 miles north of Galilee at the foot of Mount Hermon. It is not known why Jesus chose this particular place. It was the seat of worship of the Greek god Pan (the one who looked human but had the legs of a goat, a tail, and horns often playing a

pipe); it was the seat of power for the Herodian Tetrarch Herod Antipas; it may have been the center of ancient Baal worship.

Jesus left behind the notoriety of His teaching and healing so He could be alone with His disciples. He needed to be undisturbed to teach them and prepare them for what was to come. In this reading, Jesus asks five questions of His disciples to teach them and to prepare them.

The first question, the easy one, is in verse 27. As they are making their way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks the disciples, ***“Who do people say I am?”*** It’s like asking, *“What does my ministry mean to the people that we have encountered in the previous months in Galilee?”* His disciples answer what they know. They give Jesus *“the word on the street”* so to speak. Some people say Jesus is John the Baptist (now dead at the hands of Herod Antipas not far from this site), some say He is the great Old Testament prophet Elijah (also now taken to heaven), and others say Jesus was some other prophet. It is interesting that (according to Mark 8:14-15) the rumor of who Jesus was even spread to the court of Herod Antipas. When the tetrarch heard about Jesus and asked his advisors who this man with miraculous powers was, they told him exactly what the disciples told Jesus – He is John the Baptist resurrected, Elijah, or some other great prophet. Note also, that in the answers to this question about the identity of Jesus, there is an assumption that Jesus is the resurrected image of the people who are named.

But then Jesus gets more personal with these men who have seen Him change water into wine, heal lepers, calm a storm, feed thousands with a meager supply of fish and bread, walk on the water, restore hearing and sight, and exorcise demons. He asks them a second more direct, candid question in verse 29, ***“Who do you say I am?”***

Notice there is no clamoring to answer Jesus described in the reading. Only one person speaks for all the rest. We are not sure why only Peter spoke. (This is the first time that Peter serves as the spokesperson on behalf of all the disciples but certainly not the last). Peter simply says, according to St. Mark, ***“You are the Christ.”*** In a parallel story in the Gospel of St. Matthew, Peter is quoted as saying, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** Now, since Mark was a disciple of Peter, we do not know why Peter told Mark only to ***write “You are the Christ,”*** because this confession is a turning point in the Gospel. But it is what it is. You may contemplate this along with some other things later today. So, Peter defined who Jesus was. He was the Christ. The word “Christos” is the Greek word for Messiah. Peter clearly stated that Jesus was the Promised One and by acknowledging this, Jesus will be the one who fulfills the meaning of His name, given by God to Mary and Joseph for Him. The name Jesus is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Joshua which is a combination of two Hebrew words, “Yahweh,” meaning “the LORD”, and “yasha,” meaning “saves.” So Jesus's name means "the LORD saves." That defines who Jesus is. He is the Savior of His people. He is God. He is a God who has taken the form of a human.

Peter's answer should have been the answer of all of the disciples. How could the disciples have missed this? Even the demons who Jesus encountered and exorcized recognized and acknowledged who Jesus was, saying, "**You are the Son of God.**" (And by extension the Messiah.)

What happened next was a shock to Peter. He said the Messiah (the Son of Man) must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this very plainly. I am sure Jesus' disciples were aghast. Jesus described what it meant to be the Messiah, the Savior. It meant horrible suffering. It meant dying on a cross. And it meant rising from the dead. How can this be? No, no. That's not the script. The Messiah was to save the people from oppression, from foreign domination, and restore them to the greatness of their Golden Age under Kings David and Solomon. Jesus had it all wrong. He had to be corrected.

Peter got the words of his confession exactly right about who Jesus was, but he didn't know what those words meant. And then, Peter made matters worse. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. Now, the word rebuke is a strong word. It meant that Peter gave Jesus a good tongue-lashing...he bawled Him out. Peter read Jesus the riot act. Let me remind you that Peter is a fisherman who is only about halfway through his seminary training and Jesus is God in the flesh. Peter has just said that Jesus is the Messiah (and according to Matthew, the Son of God)

and now Peter takes it upon himself to scold the Son of God.

Jesus immediately saw the danger of what Peter was suggesting and He rebuked Peter right back. (Jesus read Peter the riot act.) Jesus saw Satan at work in the words and intent of Peter. Satan wanted nothing more than to turn Jesus away from going to Jerusalem to suffer and die for our sins. Jesus rebuked Peter but He was really rebuking Satan when He said, ***“Get behind me, Satan!”*** For Peter and the others, Jesus pointed out that they were using a world view and not a God view of His mission and purpose as the Messiah. Jesus said, ***“For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”***

Peter imagined the Savior to be a temporal savior. Jesus was a spiritual savior. Peter thought Jesus would use power and might to conquer His enemies. (To be sure, Jesus had this power available) but Jesus would use humility and self-denial to conquer His enemies. Peter was seeing the Jesus of Palm Sunday, not the Jesus of Good Friday. I am sure that the disciples (and most people today) would not see humiliation and self-denial as weapons against an evil force either.

How often do we make decisions based on what seems right to us instead of checking in the Word of God? How often do we assume things about God without checking the words that He Himself gave us? How often do we, like Peter, proceed in the way that we think is best and forget that God may have something totally different in mind for

us? How often do we want to use earthly riches, standing, and power to achieve earthly goals and not rely on the power of God? How often do we follow in Peter's footsteps?

How glad we can be that Jesus didn't listen to Peter. But Jesus does not stop there. Now, He teaches His disciples, who will be His witnesses, spokespersons, and are now His protégés, and anyone else who wants to be His followers that they have to do what He is about to do. If someone is to be a follower of Jesus, one must deny themselves and, in humility, take up a cross just as He will do.

Are you a follower of Jesus? Then, Jesus has given you that same choice. It is a choice each of us must make. A choice we must make over and over, again and again, in the circumstances of our lives. We must either chose ourselves (and the world) and deny Jesus or we deny ourselves (and the world) and choose Jesus. Self-denial is the beginning of discipleship. And the self-denial described by Jesus here is not simply a loyalty test, it is the way to salvation. Jesus goes on to say, that those who save their life, in other words, chose themselves over Jesus, will lose their life. Those who lose their life, in other words, deny themselves, will save their life.

I suspect that self-denial was not what Peter had in mind when Jesus said, ***"Follow me and I will make you a fisher of people."*** I wonder if that is what we had in mind when we gathered here in worship today, or what you may have thought when your baby was baptized, or whether you

understand and practice what Jesus says about self-denial on a daily basis especially in this season of Lent.

Jesus closes with a last question which we all need to contemplate today and every day that we live. The last question drives home Jesus' point about self-denial. He asks His disciples and us whether we can buy our way into the saving grace of God the Father? Will all the money we earn in this world, all the power we achieve, all the prestige, and social standing we manage to acquire make a difference when we die? Jesus asks you if you can exchange any, or all of that worldly mammon, for your soul? If we have a worldly view, you may think so. If we have a Godly view not at all so. Self-denial is a matter of salvation. Jesus' words are hard, and His way is extreme.

The way of Christ reminds us that our life is not our own. It belongs to God just as Jesus belonged to His Father. Our lives are not of this world. We are reminded that we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us, just as Jesus' life was not about Him. It is about God and His plan for us, just as it was about God's plan for Jesus. As long as we believe our life is about us, we will continue to exercise power over others, try to save ourselves, control our circumstances, and maybe even rebuke Jesus. You should note Jesus rarely exercised power over others or tried to control circumstances. He simply made different choices. Self-denial is not about being out of control or powerless. It is about the choices we make.

And there is great freedom in knowing these things. We are free to be fully alive. Through self-denial our falling

down becomes rising up, losing is saving, and death is resurrection.

Jesus chose to give - in a world that takes; Jesus chose to love - in a world that hates; Jesus chose to heal in a world that injures; He chose to give life in a world that kills. He offered mercy when others sought vengeance, Jesus forgave when others condemned, and Jesus showed compassion when others were indifferent. He trusted God's abundance when others said there was not enough.

With each choice, He denied Himself and showed the love of God and His presence. He told you in the reading today to do all things as His follower. So, here is the question to you this morning. Who do you say Jesus is? But when you answer the question about who Jesus is, it is very important that you talk about the right Jesus. He was a great teacher, healer, and prophet, but Jesus denied Himself and in His humility was beaten, scourged, mocked, nailed to a wooden cross, and died on that cruelest means of execution known to the world at that time for us. After three days He rose again. He was the one who denied Himself and chose resurrection over survival. Jesus is the one who chose you and me as His and He expects us to live like we are His to life everlasting.

Amen.