

Sermon for 9-16-18
Gospel -- Mark 8:27-38
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*"Who do you say that I am?"*ⁱ So much hangs on this question.

Our Gospel reading for today begins with a slightly different question. On the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, *"Who do people say that I am?"*ⁱⁱ

It's fair to assume that Jesus already knows the answer. People say he's many different things. John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets -- but that's not all; it's maybe just the top three. Jesus asks the question, *"Who do people say that I am?"* not to hear the list of answers, but to bring out into the open a challenging reality that still holds true today -- people say many different things about Jesus. There's a lot of confusion about who and what he was and is. We believe different things about him, we call him by different titles, we claim and proclaim different truths in his name. Jesus could just as easily stand here in the middle of this church in Springfield Ohio in 2018 and ask us, *"Who do people say that I am?"* And I bet we'd have way more than three answers!

As we see in today's reading, and indeed in all of the Gospel of Mark, the other three Gospels, and the entirety of the New Testament, this confusion about Jesus is nothing new. Leading up to this particular episode in Mark, Jesus himself hasn't done much to clarify his identity. He refers to himself with the somewhat mystical title *"Son of Man"* (which is also translated as *"the Human One"*).ⁱⁱⁱ He describes himself with metaphors -- he's the greatly celebrated bridegroom at the wedding feast, and the sower who scatters seed indiscriminately on good earth and bad.^{iv} It seems that everyone who encounters Jesus is left confused, questioning, and wondering just who this guy really is.

After calming the storm in chapter four: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"^v

In his hometown synagogue in chapter six: "Where did [he] get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? ... Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?"^{vi}

When he casts out demons and restores wholeness to those who've been possessed, people fear him.^{vii} When King Herod hears of the healings and miracles, he says, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."^{viii}

Later on in Mark's Gospel, on the day of his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus refers to himself as "*the Teacher*" and "*the shepherd*."^{ix} After his betrayal, when he's brought before the Jewish council of scribes and priests and they ask him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" he answers simply, "*I am*."^x And then, when the priests send him before Pilate and Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" his answer is evasive and noncommittal: "*You say so*."^{xi}

In fact, it's not until the moment of his death, after Jesus has taken his last breath and the curtain of the Temple is torn in two, that anyone seems to be absolutely certain about who he is -- the centurion, who exclaims "Truly this man was God's Son!"^{xii}

So, the answer to his original question ("*Who do people say that I am?*") is: all kinds of things. And when he asks this question of the disciples, his friends and closest companions, he's leading them toward a turning point. The time has come for them to move beyond all the confusion and wonder and decide what they believe; it's time to stake some claims about who Jesus is, and who they are, and why they're following him and what God has called them to do together.

Jesus asks the question again in a slightly different way -- because it's the answer to this new question that will determine everything that follows: "*But who do you say that I am?*"

Jesus has raised the dead to life, restored health to lepers, cast out demons, fed thousands, made the paralyzed walk, the deaf hear, and the blind see... and now, finally, his friends are beginning to understand. Brave, bold Peter answers the question for all of them: "You are the Messiah."^{xiii}

Poor Peter... no pat on the back for him? No gold star?

It's taken so long to arrive at this realization... but there's no time to waste. Now that the disciples realize who and what Jesus is, he must begin preparing them for the great pain and tragedy that he knows is coming.

It's a roller coaster of emotions for Peter and his friends. One moment they're rejoicing at the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-ago Promised One who has come to save the world and make all things new; and the next moment they're plunged into the depths of despair at the news that their rabbi, their shepherd, their beloved leader will soon be dismissed, rejected, and executed. They are not ready to accept this horrible news; it's not what they thought they'd signed up for!

And then, in this moment of despair and grief and angst over hopes dashed and dreams destroyed, Jesus spells out what he requires of them, and the decision they will have to make: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*"^{xiv}

Jesus needs commitment, and integrity, and selflessness. He tells his disciples, and the crowds, that if they're concerned with raising their own profiles or saving their own skins, they might as well walk away now. Jesus needs followers who are willing to make unpopular choices, and take enormous risks, and stand firmly rooted in the truth of his Gospel even when it seems all hope is lost. That's the kind of followers Jesus needed then, and still needs today.

There's a famous anecdote about the dedicated Scottish missionary, explorer, and anti-slavery crusader David Livingstone. He was one of the first Westerners to traverse the entire continent of Africa from its Atlantic to its Indian Ocean coasts. He was known for his insistence on going places and making journeys other Europeans would not dare to attempt -- largely because he believed he was on a mission from God to help bring about the end of the unspeakable travesty that was the African slave trade. That was his ultimate goal, and the source of his motivation.

The story goes that a very large and respected mission society wrote to Livingstone from London during one of his many explorations and asked: "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you."

Livingstone rejected their offer of help with this message: "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all."^{xv}

Who do we say that Jesus is? And what are we prepared to do on his behalf?

If we say he is the Prince of Peace, then shouldn't we devote ourselves to eradicating all forms of violence from our words and actions, our communities, and our world?

If we say he is our Good Shepherd, then shouldn't we tend our fellow sheep by feeding and comforting and teaching them of his abundant love?

If we say he is the Logos, the eternal Word made flesh, then shouldn't we take care with our own words, always remembering that our speech may last a moment but its injuries and ill effects may last forever?

If we say he is the great Worker of Miracles, then shouldn't we stand as beacons of hope and encouragement in a world that so often seems irreparably broken?

If we say he is the Merciful Father who forgives the sins of his prodigal son, then shouldn't we forgive ourselves and each other, never hardening our hearts and withholding that great gift of mercy?

If we say he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, then shouldn't we strive to see his face and know his presence in every person we encounter, as he asked us to do?

If we say Jesus is our Messiah, Lord, and Savior, then shouldn't we be willing to do anything he requires of us -- to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves with every fiber of our being? To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."^{xvi}

Who do we say that he is? And how far are we willing to follow him?

May we all have the courage and faith to take up our crosses and follow Jesus, even where there is no road at all. **Amen.**

ⁱ Mark 8:29 NRSV

ⁱⁱ 8:27

ⁱⁱⁱ 2:10 & 2:28

^{iv} 2:19; 4:3

^v 4:41

^{vi} 6:2-3

^{vii} 5:17

^{viii} 5:17

^{ix} 14:14; 14:27

^x 14:61-62

^{xi} 15:2

^{xii} 15:39

^{xiii} 8:29

^{xiv} 8:34-35

^{xv} from *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, ed. Michael P. Green. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990. p. 72.

^{xvi} Mark 8:34