

Mark 8:27–38 (NRSV)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Who Is Jesus for Us

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Mark 8:27–38

Among the very first things I realized when I travelled to Israel was that the painters who have portrayed Jesus as some sort of delicate flower [slide 1] or as an emaciated spindle have gotten it utterly wrong. All you have to do is to try walking all over the Judean and Galilean mountains and deserts and you know Jesus looked much more like this. [slide 2] In just the last two weeks we've read that Jesus went [slide 3] 35 miles over the Mountains to Tyre, another 25 miles up the coast to Sidon, 50 miles back over the mountains to the Sea of Galilee and then another 25 miles up to Caesarea Philippi all on foot. There is doubt that Jesus was buff. [slide 4] He had to have thighs and calves the size of trees. Walking literally in the footsteps of Jesus is no easy task, I can tell you by just what little I have done.

In this morning's passage we follow Jesus on the last leg of this journey, 25 miles going from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi. [slide 5] The text doesn't tell us why Jesus went there, why he went all that way. It does tell us that in the vicinity, as they were on the way, he posed questions to his disciples. "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?"

We have just entered the all-important center section of the Gospel of Mark. Here Jesus broaches the subject of his identity with his disciples. Who do you say that I am?

But why Caesarea Philippi? The text doesn't tell us anything about Caesarea Philippi. But Mark's early readers would have been very familiar with the place. The location, at the foot of Mt. Hermon, had been a place of the Gods since time before memory. [slide 6] This sacred cave was dedicated to the worship of Baal. Then came the Greeks and the God Pan was worshipped there. In those days the cave had a deep pool and water gushed out of the opening. It is said that sacrifices were cast into the opening as offerings to the god. [slide 7] Adjacent to the sacred cave is a rocky escarpment with a series of hewn niches. Statues of the deity Pan and others were placed in these niches. One niche housed a sculpture of Echo, the mountain nymph and Pan's consort. Another niche housed a statue of Pan's father, Hermes, son of the nymph Maia.¹

Ultimately, Caesarea Philippi came under the control of the Romans and Herod the Great. When Herod died, it went to his son Philip. Philip named the place after himself and the emperor, thus it became Caesarea Philippi.

With each change in regime the place remained sacred. Indeed, more and more sacredness was added. At the time of Jesus archaeologists tell us it would have looked like this. [slide 8] Here on a single escarpment were represented the ancient gods and the divinity of the emperor. It now becomes a bit clearer why Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi. It now becomes a little clearer why at this central juncture in the Gospel of Mark Jesus would bring his disciples to this vicinity. It now becomes a little clearer why Jesus would come to Caesarea Philippi to pose the question, who do you say that I am?

In this place the Greek and Roman deities are gathered in a three-dimensional mural. With this backdrop of divine power Jesus asks, Who am I?

¹ Info from "Pictorial Library of Bible Lands"

Peter jumps on the question. Peter the best pupil in the class gets it right. Peter says you are the Messiah. Peter gets it right on so many levels. Peter gets it right that Jesus belongs in the pantheon of deities. Peter gets it right that Jesus is not Greek or Roman; he is the Jewish Messiah. Peter gets it right. "You are the Messiah," he says.

Jesus acknowledges Peter's answer in something of an odd way. He tells them all not to tell anyone. For a moment they bask in the secret. He is the Messiah. Like those on the wall, in the cave and in the temples before them Jesus will take his place of authority and influence. And they his followers will march to victory under his banner. For a moment they bask in the bright sun of the secret revealed before them. You are the Messiah. We are your loyal followers who will reap the sweet taste of your victory.

Then, then comes one of the most remembered exchanges in all the New Testament. Jesus tells them to keep the secret, and then he starts musing almost, something like a Shakespearian soliloquy. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

No, no this cannot be. No, we are looking at this wall, these temples, these symbols of strength and victory, authority and dominion. Surely the Messiah will thrive at least as much as these. But still he says, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Peter grabs him by the sleeve, He pulls him aside. Peter who knows more than anyone how fragile is their faith. Peter cannot let him speak these rambling thoughtless thoughts.

Jesus my friend, my dear friend, do you not understand the effect of these words? You are the Christos, the Meshiach, the one anointed like a king, like those on the wall. No, not like those on the wall; you are the one, the Messiah of David, who will crush those on the wall once and for all. That itself is hard enough for us to get our minds around. We can barely believe it. If you are not more sure of yourself, if you speak these words of defeat I doubt anyone will stay with you.

Such prophetic words these words of Peter proved to be. In Jesus' defeat they would, indeed, all leave.

But Jesus will have nothing to do with Peter's rebuke. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It would be hard to overstate how much of a reversal this scene represents. Caesarea Philippi represented the shared human understanding of the gods, or as Jews insisted, of God. Throughout human societies divine authority was thought to be just like royal authority. The gods reigned in power as did the kings. So when the Jews predicted a shoot from Jesse, a Son of David as the Messiah, there was no question in anyone's mind what that meant. It was a divine figure which would defeat all the other powers and restore the fortunes of God's chosen people, which would restore David's kingdom. The idea of the Jewish Messiah had a particular Jewish narrative and model in mind, but like every other conception of divine rule, it envisioned a mighty sword and a holy victory.

So there's every reason for Peter to be confounded and distraught. When Jesus says, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed," Peter does not think this describes the Christ, he thinks this describes anti-Christ.

*** Well, of course, Jesus was right. He suffered and died, and then he rose. From its earliest beginnings the Christian churches have grappled with this curious ending. Most concluded that the story wasn't yet completed; they believed that Jesus would come again, this

time in power and glory. The earliest churches thought he would return in a very short time. Indeed, we can read in the New Testament the consternation with which many early believers were dealing with the delay. The belief persists in Christian doctrine until today. The Nicene Creed, which many churches continue to confess, says in part, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Isn't it interesting that the Nicene Creed and most beliefs about the second coming assume that Jesus will return in glory, that he will judge all people, and that his kingdom will have no end. That phrasing is preciously close to what Peter and the disciples wanted from Jesus in the first place. It's almost as if the churches have said, “Well, Jesus came, was betrayed, suffered, died and rose, but that was the first time. When he comes the second time, it will be in a blaze of glory and he'll be a real Messiah.”

But I have to wonder. Jesus walked his band of followers all the way up to Caesarea Philippi. He took them to a place where the ideas about divine power and authority were represented very much like human power and authority—emperors and gods on Olympus in control of the world. He drew for them another picture of the Messiah, the Son of Man. In that picture he tried to tell them that God's ways and human ways regarding power and authority were diametrically opposed to one another. Standing, at least figuratively, before the escarpment at Caesarea Philippi, he painted a picture of a God which eschewed royalty, privilege and might. It's as if God wanted to say, “Fine, if you want human systems to reflect divine systems, don't get it backwards. Don't look at the wall as a model. Look at a God who loves so much as to accept suffering at the hands of the very ones whom God loves.

I'm not sure what I think about Jesus' second coming, but if it is to be, perhaps there is a very good reason why it is so delayed. Maybe the Messiah will return once we begin to model human systems and aspirations on Jesus's teachings, on love and compassion; or as Paul would say it, maybe the second coming will come once we understand that the weakness and foolishness of God are truly greater than human wisdom and strength. Amen.