

Messiah...Or More?

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Year B: Pentecost 17: Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus 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?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.”

How we answer the question of who Jesus is – is central to our belief system. Peter answers Jesus question correctly, He is the ‘Messiah.’ Yet Peter and the disciples think of Messiah differently than what Jesus truly is.

We’ve all seen movies or read books that portray a ‘rags to riches’ story. So let’s say there is a teenage boy living in the slums of London. He claims that is the rightful King of England. There was some illicit relationship and this lad says he can prove that he is in direct line to the throne.

As word gets out he gains incredible popularity and just as large, forceful opposition. This is a major threat. One teenager could upend years of tradition and the whole lineage. Yet, in the end, he does become King. It changes the whole face of the monarchy as we know it. All of Europe is in an uproar. The royal family loses all popularity from the common people. They are forced to live in disgrace and poverty.

Now that would be an incredible thing wouldn't it? Hundreds of thousands of years of tradition of the kings and queens of Europe changed by one young boy.

He wasn't young. He was about 30 years old. His name was Jesus.

For now, let's release from our heads the quiet, loving, peaceful Jesus that we might prefer. In Mark's Gospel – right from Chapter 1 – we see a Jesus who is forceful. He can cast out demons. He is like the prophets of old: Elijah or John the Baptist. Jesus is a fearless man of God preaching what people do not like to hear.

We started today with the blind man receiving sight. This story, like so many in the Gospels, illustrates the next story. After this miraculous healing, Jesus leads the disciples far away from the village of the blind man, Bethsaida. He has taken them on several days journey – today it takes several hours by car – way up north on Mount Hermon. From Caesarea Philippi one can look back down the Jordan Valley. There is the road going to Jerusalem on which Jesus will travel in the end. Also in Caesarea Philippi is a temple to the Roman Emperor.

The context for this conversation means everything. It's secluded. Secret. Includes what Jesus is going against and that which He will move towards.

“Who do people say that I am?” Look back down the valley. Look around you. Who do people say that I am?

They answered easily and quickly. ‘One of the prophets. John the Baptist, Elijah.’

Then He asks them as individuals. ‘Who do you say that I am?’

Peter answers for all of them. ‘The Messiah.’

Ahh. There it is. The blind disciples are beginning to see. The veil of understanding is beginning to lift. Messiah.

When they said ‘Messiah’ they were thinking of a king. Israel had long waited for The One to come and rescue them again. As NT Wright says, “(their answer) is about the politically dangerous and theologically risky claim that Jesus is the true King of Israel, the final heir to the throne of David, the one before whom Herod Antipas and all other would-be Jewish princelings are just shabby little

imposters...they thought they'd found (their King).”ⁱ This is the beginning of their new understanding.

Through Jesus' casting out of demons, his radical care for the poor, his insistence that His followers truly walk the talk, He is announcing that God's reign will return. It will return with justice for all, with the downfall of Rome, with fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophets predictions.

Now, to ourselves. Who do we say Jesus is? God is? Take a moment and answer that for yourself. Is He primarily a teacher? A Savior from sin? A friend? Is He like Superman, cape, flying in at the last minute to fix all the problems of the world, but otherwise distant? (pause – let them think)

It's important for each of us to understand what we believe God is – what is God's role, because that rationale affects how we view God at work in our lives and in the world.

Earlier this summer, I mentioned a study of teenagers spiritual beliefs that took place in 2005. It's an old study. Yet it's results speak to how younger people are interpreting what we do at church.

It's called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. “This belief system for many teenagers teaches that living a good, happy life is being a good, moral person. Instead of including concepts like repentance, prayer, suffering for God, or observing holy days, this is therapeutic, like a therapist. God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps people to feel better about themselves and does not become too personally involved in the process.”ⁱⁱ

Who do you say that I am, asks Jesus.

Is your God the King of the Universe?

Does God heal today?

Can God cast out demons?

Does God want us bowing over God's shoes in repentance and unworthiness?

Is God intricately involved in our every decision? Does God want to be involved in every part of our lives?

Is God involved in making people's lives better, like Jesus did long ago?

Is God the God we one we profess in the Apostles' Creed?

Is God a stricter God of our childhood, say from another denomination?

Is God the God of all the stories, prophecies, parables, beginning and end, the Alpha and Omega in the whole of the Bible?

Knowing what we believe about who God is, will reveal our core theology about how we believe God acts in the world.

Here's one thing I believe. I believe that God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, is a relational God. God became flesh. Walked this earth. Changed people's lives for the better because they could see Him, touch Him, laugh with Him, and be challenged by Him. I believe God loves us beyond what we know and what we profess. I believe God is crazy in love with us, even when and most especially when we don't have a clue.

Way back long, long ago, when Moses and God were having a fireside chat next to the burning bush, God says to Moses, "I will be with you." And although the journey was pretty tough for Moses, Abraham and Sarah, Isaiah, Jesus, Peter, or Paul, that promise never wavered. God is with us. Scriptures show us God as a rock, an eagle, a judge, a woman in labor, a hen with chicks, a lover, a prophet, a shepherd, a gate, and so much more.ⁱⁱⁱ God, through Jesus was in relationship with those twelve disciples as they looked back down the Jordan Valley, the curtains just being pulled up from their eyes. Yes, He would be King. But not the King they wanted. He would be so much more!

'Who do you say I am?' This week, I invite you to write that on a post-it note and put it somewhere you can see it.

If God is scary for you, how could God become softer?

If God is very comfortable for you, does God need to challenge you to grow?

If God is completely unknown to you, begin reading Psalms or John.

If God needs to give you courage, 'I can do all things through Him.'

If God feels more like a butler or a therapist, stretch yourself to consider God's glory and power and yearning to be included in every breath you take.

I pray God who has always and will be forever in relationship with God's people, can reveal Godself to us in new life-giving ways. Amen.

ⁱ N.T Wright. Mark for Everyone. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky. 2004. Pg 107.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic_therapeutic_deism

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris. Amazing Grace; A Vocabulary of Faith. Riverhead Books. New York. 1998. Pg 110-111.