Sermon 09-16-18

A Question and a Calling

Mark 8:27-36

**Sermon Starter**

Today we going to look at one of the most important moments in the gospels as recorded by Mark, the moment when we finally begin to understand the identity of Jesus and what it means to be his disciples.

**I. Caesarea Philippi**

The story takes place in Caesarea Philippi. In Jesus time this was a largely pagan city with only a small Jewish population. **GRAPHIC: This is a site that most tour groups in the Holy Land do not visit.** The site is 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee as the crow flies, a two-day walk. It was an unusual place for Jesus to bring his disciples, not only for its distance from the Sea of Galilee, but because it was a largely pagan city. **GRAPHIC: The city was built around an ancient shrine to the god, Pan.** Pan was the god of nature, the wild, herds and flocks. He also had the ability to make noises that frightened people – hence our word **panic** comes from him. He was worshiped in beautiful places in nature. Caesarea Philippi, until the time of Jesus, was known as Panium, or Paneas, named for him, and some believed his birth place was a large cave there at the base of Mt. Hermon.

**GRAPHIC: You can see Jordan’s headwaters as they emerge from the underground springs. And you see the cave of Pan.** In ancient times there was an opening in the cave floor that dropped into a deep aquifer. It was so deep; no one could measure it – it was seen as a portal or gateway to the abyss – to the realm of the dead or Hades. Worshipers would drop animals as offerings into the abyss.

**GRAPHIC: The ruins you see here were from temples built around the time of Christ. The niches once held idols - statues of Pan and his companions.**

As we consider our story from Mark’s gospel let me remind you of a few of the titles by which the Roman emperors were known. There was King, Lord, Savior of the world, Son of God (a description that appeared on Roman coins of the day like this one which features Tiberius, the emperor when our story takes place. **IPAD: COIN** which reads in part Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus). The backs of the coins often stated Pontifex Maximus – which means high priest. Augustus Caesar’s ascension to the throne was called the “beginning of the good news.”

You’ll notice the many parallels between the titles for the emperor and the New Testament titles and ways of referring to Jesus. Mark’s gospel even begins with the words, **GRAPHIC: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”**

King Philip, son of King Herod the Great, renamed this city, which had been known as Panium, or Panias, before this time, Caesarea Philippi, to honor both the emperor and to recognize the city as Philip’s new capital. In case your head is swimming in what seems insignificant historical details, let’s get back to the story…

In this city, now the capital of King Philip, with its temple to Augustus, and renamed in honor of the Roman emperors who were called, King, Lord, Son of God, and Savior of the World, Jesus asks his question of his disciples, **GRAPHIC: Who do you say that *I* am?**

This was a dangerous question to ask in this place that hailed both the local king, and the emperor. The answer, spoken loudly enough, could get them arrested and killed as insurrectionists leading a rebellion. I suspect the disciples remained silent. Finally, Peter spoke up saying, **GRAPHIC: You are the Christ**. And in Matthew and Luke they add, “The Son of the Living God” (in contrast to Tiberius who was said to be the son of the divine, but very dead, Augustus!). Let’s unpack Peter’s answer for a moment.

**II. The Christ**

Peter calls Jesus the Christ. Actually, Christ is a Greek term and Peter spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. What Peter actually said was, “you are the Messiah” – ha Mashiach in Hebrew. Messiah and Christ both mean the same thing – they mean, **GRAPHIC: CHRIST=MESSIAH=ANOINTED ONE=KING.** When kings were installed the high priest would pour oil on their head, and perhaps their chest and hands – a sign that this person was chosen by God as God’s ruler over the people. Each of Israel’s kings was anointed – a Mashiach. But the prophets of the Old Testament foretold the coming of an idealized future king – a future anointed one. This one would be from the line of David. They envisioned him as an earthly king who would both restore Israel’s greatness and also usher in a religious revival, purifying the nation and leading the people back to God. He would usher in an age of peace. At the time of Jesus many were expecting this person, and, in fact, there were more than a dozen persons[[1]](#footnote-1) just before and throughout the first century, who either claimed themselves, or about whom others claimed, that they were the messiah. Most led revolts against the Romans and were killed.

When Peter answered that Jesus was the Christ, he was confessing that Jesus was the King Jews had hoped would come, a king sent from God to rule over his people. A king who would overthrow the Herodian kings and cast off Rome’s rule over the land. But Mark does not record this. Instead Mark notes simply that Jesus **GRAPHIC: Sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.**

Many wonder why Jesus repeatedly tells those he heals, and here, his disciples, not to tell anyone who he is or what he has done for them. Why does he do this? Scholars refer to this as the **GRAPHIC: MESSIANIC SECRET MOTIFF** in the Gospel of Mark. This text helps us understand what I believe is the most likely answer.

To declare someone to be the messiah was an act of insurrection – because the Jewish expectation was not a spiritual messiah, but an actual king, telling others about him, what he had done, their belief that he was the messiah, would have expedited his arrest and death. Those who were in power, the members of Herod’s family and the representatives of Rome, were quick to respond to would-be messiahs. Jesus warning not to tell anyone that he was the Christ, the Messiah, was seeking to control the timing of when he would reveal himself, and, as he said in John’s gospel at the wedding in Cana, “My time has not yet come.” He had a plan – and things to say and people to heal – before his time would come. He had a plan to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey at the Passover, and to transform the Passover Seder into the Last Supper. This is why he repeatedly tells those who might think he was the messiah, “Don’t tell anyone,” and he might have added, “yet.”

If you ask someone who is a faithful Jew why they don’t believe Jesus was the messiah, they’ll tell you, “Because he didn’t do the things the messiah was supposed to do.” They still await and pray for the messiah to come and rule with power, restore the kingdom and usher in an age of peace. And, they note, Jesus didn’t do that.

Jesus clearly understood these expectations. And he knew the scriptures well. But his own conception of what the messiah would do, and how the messiah would save, were shaped by other scriptures. He never intended to raise an army. It wouldn’t be by military force that he would deliver the Jews. It would be by the power of selfless, sacrificial love and redemptive suffering.

Listen to what Jesus told Peter and the disciples about the things that would happen to him, **GRAPHIC: 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 was saying, “You have it all wrong.” He saw his mission as drawing people to God, teaching and preaching and demonstrating who God is and who God called his people to be. He was less concerned about the Romans than about the religious hypocrites and how they led people away from God. He was not concerned with defeating the Roman legions, but instead with defeating the darkness within each of us. He who would not destroy his enemies, but call people to defeat them by the power of love. This is the way that Jesus defined the messiah’s work.

**III. To be a Christian**

The question Jesus asked Peter and the others that day still echoes throughout history. He asks you today, “Who do you say that I am?” And he invites you to say, with Peter, join me, **GRAPHIC: You are the Christ.**

For Jesus to be the Christ, for each of us, is for us to serve him as our King, our Lord, our Master. It is yield ourselves to him, and to seek daily to follow where he leads.

That’s where the adventure begins. But we can’t miss how Jesus ends this conversation with Peter and the others. **GRAPHIC: 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?**

Did you hear this? **GRAPHIC [BUILD LIST]:**

**• Self-denial**

**• Sacrifice, and at times, suffering**

**• Following Jesus**

Let’s take the first – self-denial. We all prefer self-indulgence to self-denial.

I don’t want us to misunderstand – Jesus enjoyed life, he ate with his friends, he spent quiet time alone, he rested, I picture him laughing and playing. God intended for us to have Sabbath. He created pleasure and fun. But the basic rhythm of our life is to think of others, to serve, to give. It is in dying to the idea that the world revolves around you and that your life should be devoted to your personal happiness, that real life begins.

It is true in the business world – the employees who are not thinking first of themselves but of their team and what’s best for the organization find the most likely path to success. Francis of Assisi was right when he said, **GRAPHIC: “It is in giving that we receive.”** The happiest people I know spend a lot less time thinking of themselves than others. And many of the most miserable people I know spend much of their time thinking of themselves.

I’d ask you, is your faith convenient, easy, all about benefits without any cost? Then Jesus would suggest you’ve yet to really discover true discipleship.

I love how William Barclay describes Christ’s call in this passage, **GRAPHIC: Jesus never sought to lure men to him by the offer of an easy way; he sought to challenge them, to waken the sleeping chivalry in their souls…He came not to make life easy, but to make men great.** I love that last line, “He came not to make life easy, but to make men great.

The measure of your life is not your net worth, the vacations you have taken, the cars you drive, the ease and leisure with which you live. The real measure of your life is found in doing those things that require you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus the King.

Listen once more to the words of Jesus, **GRAPHIC: “Who do you say that I am?”**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, 09-19-18

Mark 8:27-38

27 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?’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.

31 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. 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.’

34 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. 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.’

1. I believe the number is actually 16. See the excellent articles at: http://www.livius.org/articles/religion/messiah/? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)