

SERMON TITLE: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

TEXT: Mark 8:27-38

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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INTRODUCTION

Last week we were in the book of James—perhaps one of the most pragmatic books in all of Scripture. James is all about what faith looks like on the ground. We saw that James was very concerned about *how faith is lived out*. This is not to say that what we believe is not important or that the content of our beliefs is not significant; but for James, the truthfulness of our message is very tightly bound up in how that content is expressed.

So, if last week’s text represents an emphasis on what faith looks like in every day life, this week’s has to do with one of the most basic beliefs we will ever have. We are in the gospel of Mark today. Specifically, we are looking at Mark 8:27-38 and the story of Peter’s confession of Jesus’ identity

JESUS THE MYSTERY MAN

For the past two thousand years, people have been asking and offering a wide variety of answers to the question Jesus asks in our passage this morning—the question on the front of your bulletins: “Who do you say that I am?”

The first Christians’ proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord” and for a large part of Western history that was assumed to be the case (even if not always very well understood). But over the last few hundred years, Jesus has become a rather flexible figure! Jesus has been described as everything from a gentle peacenik hippy-type, to a wandering philosopher, to a Che Guevara-type political revolutionary, to someone who was deeply confused—possibly even mentally ill—and had a Messiah complex, to a proto-American television evangelist to any number of other conceptions. Everyone has their ideas about who Jesus is.

Just this week I came two very different conceptions of Jesus. One was in a review of a new book about the Gospel of Mark which claims to “discover” a Jesus who saw himself as nothing but an ordinary human being wracked with existential angst, who had no interest in questions of morality and for whom the events of Mark’s gospel represented one long process of self-exploration and identity formation. No divine mission. No understanding of himself as Israel’s saviour. No resurrection. Just a heroic, tormented young man who ends up getting himself killed.

From the opposite end of the spectrum, comes an answer I saw in a movie called *The Wrestler*. The scene involves a conversation about Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* between two people whose bodies have undergone a lot of abuse (by themselves

and others) and who are seen by society as worthless pieces of meat. After a brief discussion about the extent of Jesus' suffering in the film one of them says: "Huh. He sounds like one [expletive] tough dude."

There are no shortages of opinions in our culture about who Jesus was and why he mattered (if, indeed, he did matter at all). The "real Jesus" isn't always easy to find.

Last fall Shawn Scheer led his Jr. high Sunday school class through an exploration of a song that touches on these themes. The song is by a band called "Downhere" (from Canada!) and it's called "The Real Jesus." We're going to listen to this song and look at some images that accompany it.

PLAY "THE REAL JESUS," BY DOWNHERE WITH PPT PRESENTATION.

There's a lot going on in that song. There are lots of different understandings of Jesus, some good, some maybe not so much; some accurate, some not so much. How do we find the "real Jesus" amid all the competing and sometimes contradictory voices we hear?

MARK 8:27-38: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Well, our text this morning also deals with a question of who, exactly, the real Jesus is.

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

*²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"
Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."*

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

The word "Messiah" is one of those words that we may be *too* familiar with. We know it relates to Jesus somehow, we may know that it is a term that comes out of Israel's history, but it's a strange word for us. We know what the words "president" or "prime minister" or "general" or even "rabbi" or "priest" mean, but "Messiah?" That we're not so sure about.

A bit of background: The setting of this conversation is important. It says that Jesus asks his disciples about who they say he is in Caesarea Philippi. This was way north of Jerusalem, way north even of Galilee (1.5 hrs by car today in the Golan Heights). It seems like an odd place to go for a lesson on Jesus' identity.

But Caesarea Philippi was a hotbed of religious experimentation—everything from paganism to various Greek religions. It was also home to a prominent temple devoted to the newest pagan God—the Roman Emperor himself!

And in *this* context, Peter confesses Jesus as the “Messiah.” What would this word have meant in this context?

It didn’t mean “divine being” or “second person of the Trinity.” Jesus would be revealed as these things later on, but at this point in the story, the word “Messiah” was a *political* title. For Jewish readers and listeners, the word “Messiah” would have meant someone who would liberate Israel from the Roman Empire, who would restore political autonomy to Israel, and kick in the reign of peace and worship of God.

Messiahs had to do at least three things:

1. Rebuild/cleanse the temple
2. Defeat the enemy that was threatening God’s people
3. Bring God’s justice to bear—in Israel and throughout the world

This is what people expected from their Messiahs. This is likely what Peter had in mind when he made his declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

And Jesus doesn’t correct him (in fact, in Matthew’s account, Jesus very publicly affirms Peter’s statement). Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah. Right there in the city where an image of the Roman Emperor was worshiped. This is exciting stuff. You can almost sense the disciples’ enthusiasm. *Finally*, things are going to turn around for them and their people. The Messiah is going to put people in their place and make things right!

But what happens when we read on:

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? ³⁷ Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? ³⁸ If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

All of a sudden Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah seems on shaky ground! What’s all this stuff about suffering?! Messiahs don’t do that. That’s not part of the job

description! That's not what we're waiting for! Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus has strong words for him in return: "Get behind me Satan! You do not have the concerns of God in mind."

Peter goes from hero to zero pretty quickly here. He shows that even though he understood *some* things about who Jesus was, there was a *lot* that he didn't know. He had his own concerns in mind—human concerns, concerns about his nation, possibly about revenge, about political action—not God's.

Jesus accepts Peter's initial (correct) statement of his identity but then begins to redefine it.

It's almost as if Jesus says, "Yes, I am the Messiah. Now let me show you what that means.

It means that I will suffer and die for the sake of my people Israel. It means that the way that God redeems and reclaims a world crippled by human wickedness is by suffering it himself through me. It means that those who follow me will follow the pattern of my life and my death. It means that suffering precedes glory. It means that God works differently than we might imagine he ought to. It means that political might and violence are not the ways that my kingdom comes. It means that you will have allow me to redefine your conception of what a Messiah is. And who I am."

A DIFFERENT SCENARIO

On Friday afternoon, as I was re-reading this text, I decided to try a thought experiment. I tried to reconstruct the scene from Mark 8 but instead of it being in first century Palestine amongst a people steeped in a *Jewish* worldview, it would be in twenty-first century North America amongst a people steeped in a *Christian* worldview. What might that look like? What might Jesus say?

"Who do people say that I am," Jesus asks?

Well, some say you're a pretty good man—a bit weird, but a pretty moral guy who loved peace. Some say you're a religious fanatic—a lunatic who inspired centuries of religious intolerance and hatred."

And then Jesus turns to you. To me. "What about you? Who do you say that I am?"

What would we say?

Here's one possible answer: "Well, that's easy Jesus. We know who you are. You're our personal Lord and Saviour (a term that never appears in Scripture!).

And then Jesus would say... what? What would he say?

I think he would say, “Yes, I am your ‘personal Lord and Saviour.’ Now let me show you what that means.”

It means that you, personally, are a part of my plan to reclaim what was scarred by the Fall and are invited to join with me in the project of redemption.

It means that you, personally, are called to be my hands and feet in a hurting world, to live a life of worship and service to others—a life of self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of those I love.

It means that you, personally, must decide if you are prepared to forfeit your soul—the deepest part of who you are as an image-bearer of God—by living exclusively for yourself and ignoring the full life I have made possible for you.

It means that you, personally, are called to move beyond an understanding of salvation where the status of your individual soul is more important to you than loving your neighbour as yourself.

It means that you, personally, must understand that I do not belong to you like a possession. You belong to me. You are a part of my plans, but my plans are much bigger than you.

That’s one idea of how the conversation might go. You might imagine a different one.

But the important thing I want us to see is that we are in the same position as the disciples. We all have our conceptions of who the “real Jesus” is and none of them are 100% correct.

Jesus is too big, too deep, too mysterious for us to grasp him in his totality. We must always be open to humbly being corrected and to have our understanding of who Jesus is reoriented by him.

Jesus had to give the disciples’ understanding of who he was as their “Messiah” a facelift. He had to tell them what it meant to be a Messiah (he would later *show* them). This “facelift” wasn’t what they wanted or expected. But it was what they needed.

Are we open to meeting a Jesus that we may not want or expect?

THE REAL JESUS

In Mark 8, Jesus gives his disciples a glimpse of who the “real Jesus” was, but even at the end of his life his disciples were a confused and frightened lot. They had been closer to Jesus than anyone, and they had still missed so much.

His disciples saw this man do unbelievable things. They saw two miraculous feedings. They saw blind men see, deaf men hear, lepers walk; they saw an “unclean” Gentile woman’s daughter healed, they saw Jesus walk on water and calm a storm.

They saw Jesus deliberately flout Jewish law about the Sabbath, they saw him run into trouble with the religious elite because of his apparent disregard for cherished traditions.

They heard him speak about the kingdom of God in strange metaphors—he talked about mustard seeds, different kinds of soil, lamps under baskets, and about deliberately speaking in strange ways so that—to echo the language of the prophets—those who have ears to hear will hear but those who do not won’t understand.

The disciples have heard and seen a lot. They have seen a man speak and act in strange and confusing ways, yet also with undeniable power and truth.

And yet... when Jesus asked his disciples who they said he was, they still did not grasp just what kind of a man this Jesus was. They didn’t get the “real Jesus.”

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

We may not have been with Jesus in the same way that his disciples were, but Jesus’ question to Peter is a question that Jesus continues to ask, two thousand years later.

Who do you say that I am?

He asks it to you. He asks it to me. He asks it through Scripture, he asks it through friends and neighbours, he asks it through enemies, he asks it through pain and suffering and joy and triumph and all the circumstances of life we face.

Who do you say that I am?

It is a question that many of us probably figure we have asked and answered and we’re pretty much done with it. Many of us have been followers of Jesus for a long time—some for their entire lives! We know all the right answers.

We know that Jesus died so that the bad things we’ve done can be forgiven and the bad things that others do to us can be healed and forgiven. We know that Jesus is the answer to the world’s problems, even if we’re not sure about exactly how it all works.

For those of us for whom Jesus’ question is an old one, the danger is that we will answer too quickly. We will assume that we know who Jesus is, that the combination of images that we’ve picked up over our lives—from flannel graphs in children’s Sunday School classes to a lifetime of sermons to Mel Gibson’s movie—represents the “real Jesus” and we have nothing more to discover. Our answer to Jesus’ question is a habitual one, an instinctive one.

Our danger is the one symbolized by Peter. We know who Jesus is and what he's supposed to do. We assume Jesus fits the template of our human concerns.

On the other end, this may be a question that you're considering for the first time this morning. Perhaps you've always been vaguely familiar with Jesus—perhaps even through some of the caricatures we saw in the song at the beginning—but you've never asked why he ought to matter to you.

The danger here is not realizing that the question *really is* addressed to you.

If you feel like Jesus is asking this question to you, please talk to someone. There is no more important question that you will ever ask or answer. Don't keep it to yourself. Talk to someone—it can be a pastor or it can be a trusted Christian friend. But talk to someone who has lived at least part of their life in response to the question. Pray with them. Ask Jesus to show you who he is and how he would have you respond.

CONCLUSION

Wherever you fit on the spectrum, the invitation is to recommit yourselves to a lifetime of loving and learning about and growing in the knowledge of the real Jesus.

The Gospel of John ends with these words:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

What an amazing picture! Even the whole world cannot contain everything that can be said about this Jesus who graciously comes to us and shares himself with us.

We can rest secure in the knowledge that Jesus always gives enough of himself to us. We may never fully understand the “real Jesus”—at least not this side of eternity. But Jesus still comes to us. He still shows us who he is. Sometimes gently, sometimes in frustration that we're *still* not getting it...

But always lovingly. Always with our best interests in mind. Always trying to remind us that his concerns are not necessarily the same as ours.

And always with the goal of conforming us to his image so that we might in turn love a world who needs a touch from “the real Jesus.”

Thanks be to God.

BENEDICTION (ROM 16.25-27)