

## Aug 24 – Who Do You Say That I Am?

### Matthew 16:13-20

Sometimes location matters a lot when it comes to events in Jesus' life. Today we have such a time, at least to most Biblical scholars. When Jesus asks this question, we are told he is in the district of Caesarea Philippi. This was a Roman garrison city named for two decidedly Gentile Roman leaders—Caesar in Rome and the tetrarch Philip in northern Judea. It is one of the most Gentile places Jesus will visit as an adult. To reframe the question, Jesus is asking “Who do people in *this* region say the Son of Man is?” The Jewish population of this town would be influenced by their living in a secular place, touched by Roman and in particular Greek philosophical concepts.

The answers to this question say a lot about the hopes and expectations of these people. Some of them thought the Son of Man would be John the Baptist returned. Jesus was careful to not ask what people thought about him but what were their expectations and hopes related to God's deliverance through the Son of Man first proclaimed in the Book of Daniel. That John the Baptist tops the list indicates just how expectant (and perhaps disappointed) they were. John had looked like and acted like a prophet. John had proclaimed that God was going to do a great thing soon. But then John had been arrested and beheaded. It felt as if their hopes of deliverance had been dashed unless God sent John back from the grave. This idea goes along with some Greek beliefs in the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation.

Others seemed to expect a prophet to return, either from heaven as symbolized by Elijah who did not die but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind or by one raised from the grave like Jeremiah or another of the major prophets. It is clear than they believed that only an extraordinary intervention could generate true deliverance. Without them having to say it, the implications were pretty clear. Jesus did not meet their criteria. His ministry of teaching and healing and compassion would not have inflamed the people of this land with hope. We should not be too hard on them. When you live under constant threat and your beliefs are attacked daily it is easy to believe that this is the way it will always be unless God does something spectacular.

Then Jesus asks the more important question. To the disciples he asks, “And who do *you* say I am?” Peter’s response is also telling. “You are the Christ, Son of the living God.” In other words, you are the promised deliverer. You are what folks were looking for in the Son of Man, whether they understood that to be something like John the Baptist or one of the prophets returned from the dead, but also much more.

Peter’s two fold response is important to understand and to claim. First of all, what does it mean to say, “You are the Christ or Messiah?” At least at this moment Peter was not thinking about the military images that had been draped around this term over the centuries. He would certainly not be talking about such ideas in a place like Caesarea Philippi where such pronouncements could lead to arrest for it would be seen as a threat to Rome. He was thinking of the idea of God’s anointed who comes to save. Whether for Peter savior meant spiritual or political is up for debate.

The hopes for, the longings of the people for a savior, Peter was saying, was met in Jesus. They didn’t need something miraculous or spectacular for that saving to happen. They just needed to listen to Jesus and believe. Peter was saying in effect that in his time with Jesus he had found that longing fulfilled. He had found peace and wholeness.

But he goes on to say that in Jesus was something more, much more. Jesus was not just savior but the son of the living God. Now this was before Jesus’ death and resurrection so there was no thought about the promises of eternal life in this pronouncement. What was Peter proclaiming?

In Jesus he found a spark of the divine. For a man raised in the Jewish faith with its strict monotheism this was a radical idea. Even more so in a place like Caesarea Philippi where the Greeks and Romans believed that the gods came and lived among us. But He was trying to say Jesus was more than a man, he was more than a prophet. In his role of anointed one God was amongst us.

He was saying that in Jesus’ words he was hearing the words of God. Again, surprising ideas for one raised to believe in the sacredness of the Torah and that only in it was God’s word shared with human kind. Now Peter was saying God was speaking

anew to people. Jesus words about a God of love and mercy were not just the ideas of a new itinerant preacher but God's word for all who would listen.

Finally he was saying in Jesus' actions; his healing ministry, his willingness to reach out to the marginalized, like women, children and lepers, his proclaiming the forgiveness of people's sins, and his challenging the existing order of things, we were seeing the work of God being done.

Peter's pronouncement said so much about his understanding and his hopes and why he journeyed with Jesus. Jesus, for his part, does not condemn Peter, as he often does when Peter blurts out something. But instead says it is on these ideas that my church will be built.

I want us to dwell on the implications of what Peter said that day and see if we could respond as positively to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Too often when we think of Jesus as savior and son of God we only focus on the Easter message of eternal life. Peter proclaims that there is so much more to who Jesus is and what he said and did. Peter's proclamation of Jesus as savior and Son of God, shorn of our Easter beliefs, gives us a challenge as to what it means to be the church, the body of Christ. It is this belief that Jesus said we should build upon.

First of all this is a church for and in the world. Too often we spend most of our time and energy as a church getting people ready for heaven. This can cause us to be too judgmental. A church built on Peter's declaration prior to Easter means we believe Jesus is in the world.

So do we believe we hear the spark of the divine not only in Jesus' words that have come down to us but in the words and actions of those who follow him? Do we live as ones guided by that divine spark in all that we do? There is a big difference in how we live if we see our faith as getting us ready for a reward someday versus following the divine today.

It means that we, like Jesus must care about all people, in particular the marginalized. It means striving to be forgiving and loving. It means rejecting doctrines of

hate and discrimination. Our goal is to live faithfully in the here and now. If Jesus is savior of the world and Son of God pre-Easter it means we, Christ's body, must be in and for the world. The gift of eternal life is a bonus not our daily focus.

Let me close with just one example. Church was something you did on Sunday but it didn't have much impact on him the rest of the week. He had gone to church all of his life and saw it as "insurance" for getting into heaven. Then he had a massive heart attack and was the recipient of many cards, visits and meals from the church. He had never felt such love before. For him this made a profound difference. All of a sudden he was asking how he could live his faith in the world. How could he show kindness and care to others as he had received it? He started to ask, "What would Jesus want me to do in this situation?" Faith moved from sitting in a pew on a Sunday because it was the right thing to do to living it daily. It changed how he viewed people and life. This is part of what it means to accept Jesus as savior and Son of God not just for the promise of eternal life someday but today and every day.