

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
September 13, 2015**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text-- Mark 8: 27-38**

“Who do the people say that I am?” Jesus asks the disciples. And then, more pointedly, “Who do *you* say I am?”

What kinds of questions are these? And why now? As they reach Caesarea Philippi, a Roman stronghold in the northeastern part of Galilee? Not in an intimate setting where they can feel comfortable – and safe. But here, where the power of the Roman Empire is evident amidst the temples to pagan Gods. Why this, Jesus? Why now?

Oh, it wasn't that the question hadn't been asked before. Why, not so long ago, they had asked themselves what kind of man could still the raging sea, quiet the storm. Others had marveled at his teaching and his authority, wondering where it came from.

In their time with Jesus, observing him, listening to him, seeing the healings and the miracles, the out of the ordinary things he did, surely they wondered. Who was this man who had called them from the everyday lives, who compelled them go with him, following him through thick and thin, exciting times and scary times? Surely, they talked about it amongst themselves – wondering if he was, indeed, a prophet – an Elijah, a Moses. Maybe even speculated about the Messiah. But then, talked themselves out of it. How could that be – an unknown man from Nazareth, the son of a carpenter? Ridiculous.

But this time, Jesus asked the question himself. And Peter blurted out for the very first time, “the Christos.” The Christ. The Messiah. No doubt he felt pretty good about himself, daring to say that. And was probably a bit proud of having the good sense to follow this one. The one who would overturn the powers that be and bring peace and harmony to the land. That, at least, was Peter's expectation of what the Messiah would do.

What a bummer it must have been, then, to hear what Jesus had to say. Yet another first – far from a picture of a glorious takeover, it was the first prediction in Mark of suffering to come. Suffering and rejection for himself, but that was not all. This same suffering and rejection would extend to all who would aspire to follow him. (Now, Jesus is talking not only to his close disciples but to the entire crowd.) This is the pivot point for Jesus' earthly ministry. From here on, they turn toward Jerusalem, toward the reality that the Kingdom of God on earth is not going to be easy. It will not be an instant reversal of power of good and evil.

Maybe that's why Jesus chose to go to Caesarea Philippi. There, in a place where they are surrounded by the trappings of false idols, power and wealth, and privilege gained on the backs of the people, his message would provide a glaring contrast. And at this particular time, they had been with him long enough to have seen and heard and experienced him in

many settings and situations. They had seen him turn from his own needs and purposes to heal and to feed others. They had witnessed how he flouted laws and practices that got in the way of kindness and compassion. He healed on the Sabbath. He touched those considered impure – lepers and those possessed by demons. He engaged with sinners – prostitutes and money lenders – and with gentiles. He demonstrated another way – a way of love and compassion. But he wasn't going to be able to do any of that, let alone confronting religious leaders with their hypocrisy, without antagonizing people who could make life very difficult. Suffering, rejection, yes, maybe even loss of life.

This was what it meant to be the Messiah. This is what it would mean for those who followed his way. A message that was hard to hear from Jesus in that time before he underwent arrest and crucifixion. A message that the people of Mark's time were actually living.

What about people in our time? Who do we say Jesus is? For Peter, it was much easier to say "the Messiah" than to comprehend what that would mean. For us, I suppose, with the advantage of our New Testament with the Gospels, our creeds and doctrines – hundreds and hundreds of years of tradition, it is easier to say words like "the only son of God" in our creed each Sunday or savior, redeemer, shepherd or friend in our prayers and our hymns than it is to understand their depth of meaning.

Does it really matter how we answer the question? I think it does. Because how we answer forms us as his followers. Jesus was very clear in the passage as to what it would take to follow him. Taking up our cross. Losing our lives in order to gain them – OR saving our lives and losing our very souls.

We can simply recite the words of the creed and doctrine. And give it little more thought. Or we can proclaim only the tender shepherd Jesus who leads and protects his flock, the gentle, comfortable Jesus who walks with me and talks with me. We might then become passive. Not "interfering" with other peoples' business. Not making waves. Avoiding speaking out against injustice in order to keep the peace. The trouble is, that's not the fierce love that Jesus exhibits. That's not what followers are called to do.

Andy Doyle, Episcopal Bishop of Texas, says it this way:

In some way I guess, for the Christian who reads this passage today, we are encouraged to look up and out of our safe community and wonder...am I at the crossroads? Am I picking up Jesus' Cross of Grace? Am I standing on the edge?

Or, have I chosen the safe road, the road well traveled? Have I chosen the safe Messiah who is safely kept in the church? Have I chosen a Messiah that requires very little change of me; and certainly one that would not dare to invite me to soil myself in the service of others?

So, we might ask on this Sunday, who is your Messiah and what is his cross like? Maybe, just maybe, the Messiah the church and her good and saintly people have chosen is not quite dangerous enough for the Jesus of today's Gospel.

The world we live in is really not that different from Caesarea Philippi. Oh, the cast of characters, the false idols have changed. But there still is the power, the privilege, and the unjust distribution of wealth. Can we love like Jesus did? We know we can fiercely love our own children or grandchildren when they are treated unfairly or are at risk of harm? Can we love others in the same way? Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

Amen.