

Questions Jesus Asked sermon series

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

[Mark 8:27-29](#)

“Who do you say that I am?” This is one of the most difficult questions Jesus asked his disciples. He wanted to know what they thought of him. And, this is the question each of us is confronted with at some point in our faith journey as followers of Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon near the water source of the Jordan River about 25 miles north of Lake Galilee, Caesarea Philippi was a city of Greco-Roman culture. Today, Caesarea Philippi is just an archaeological site and nearly uninhabited. But, in Jesus’ time, this ancient city flourished with religious activities as it was the worship center for the Greek god Pan, a half-man, half-goat deity. Pan was the god of nature and agriculture and was considered to be the guardian of flocks and herds.

Why did Jesus take his disciples to such a place of paganism, outside Jewish territory? My guess is that they went there seeking a place of seclusion and solitude, and the Gospel of Luke’s version of the story seems to support my speculation. Luke does not give us the name of the place where Jesus and his disciples were, but he says that they were praying in private.

Actually, it makes sense to say that Jesus and his disciples went to Caesarea Philippi to take a break from their ministry when you consider how busy they had been. They had been constantly subjected to large crowds of people. Early in Jesus’ ministry, the news of his marvelous teaching and miraculous healing had quickly spread through word of mouth. Remember that it was before the days of Facebook and Twitter. People heard about Jesus, and they came out to hear his messages and witness his miracles. And, they followed him everywhere he went - to the synagogue, to the lakeshore, to the mountainside, and private homes in the city of Jerusalem and the province of Galilee. Sometimes, Jesus went off to quiet places, seeking to pray alone, but it did not take long for people to find out where he was. He was like a pop star.

According to the Gospel of Mark, sometimes, Jesus and his disciples did not even have a chance to eat because they were being bombarded by the crowd. (Mark 3:20, 6:31) When it happened for the second time, Jesus and his disciples resorted to going away on a boat to a solitary place, so that they could eat and rest for a while. But, when people saw Jesus and his disciples leaving, they ran and got to where they sailed off to ahead of them! (Mark 6:32-33). One time, a big crowd of people stayed with Jesus for three days, running out of food in the process. And Jesus, taking pity on them, performed a miracle to feed them (Matthew 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10).

So, this time, seeking a place where they could have some uninterrupted downtime, away from the constant demands of their ministry, Jesus and his disciples traveled farther to the north, deep into pagan territory. They knew it was a place where their devoted fellow Jews would not want to go near. In the beautiful countryside and in the moment of quietness, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Upon their answer, he asked them another question pointblank, “Who do you say that I am?”

I am sure the disciples found the first question to be an easy one to answer. The popularity of Jesus, the new, young rabbi in town, kept rising. Everywhere, people were talking about him - how he looked like, what he said, what he did, and where he came from. People were speculating about his identity. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him" (Mark 6:14). Actually, king Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded also believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. (Mark 6:16) Certainly, there must have been a physical resemblance. They were cousins after all. And they both boldly preached a message of repentance.

Others believed that Jesus was Elijah who had come back to life from the past, and they had convincing grounds for such an extraordinary claim. Both Jesus and Elijah had preached convicting sermons and performed incredible miracles. As Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Elijah also raised a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24). Still others believed Jesus was one of the prophets, like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Hosea. And the disciples reported to Jesus all these things they had heard from other people.

"Who do people say that I am?" This is an easy of a question for us to answer, as it was for Jesus' disciples. As there were many different opinions about Jesus in his time, many things have been said about him throughout Christian church history. You can turn to books and find out what well-known theologians have said about Jesus. Or you can simply look it up on Google, by typing his name or saying, "Okay Google, who is Jesus?," which is what my 6-year old grandson would probably do. Or if you want to find out what people today think of Jesus, you can conduct street interviews. Certainly, you will find no shortage of answers to this question.

But, what about, the second question Jesus asked to his disciples: "But, who do *you* say that I am?" Basically, it was the same question that Jesus had asked immediately prior except for one word. Yet, with the change of the single word from "people" to "you," Jesus' question became a totally different one - a question that was much more difficult to answer, a question that demanded the disciples to offer their personal statements about Jesus.

What do you think the response was like from the disciples? We are told that, unlike the different responses the first question brought forth, this time, only Peter spoke. I wonder if Jesus' second question was met by the disciples' awkward silence. Traveling with Jesus, they had heard his powerful preaching and dynamic teaching. They had witnessed Jesus performing miracles of healing and exorcism. He had fed a multitude of people twice. With his supernatural power, Jesus had even raised a 12-year old girl from the dead and calmed a severe storm that had threatened to sink their boat out on the lake. Yet, judging by the silence, the disciples must have not known, or must have still not made up their minds about who Jesus was. So, I imagine it came as somewhat of a relief when they heard Simon Peter answer, "You are the Messiah."

"Who do you say that I am?" If we are serious about our faith as followers of Jesus Christ, we too need to be confronted with this question that Jesus asked his first followers pointblank. And, we need to spend some time with this question. Because while it sounds so simple, it's a hard question to give an answer to.

Unlike the first question, we cannot turn to other people, or books or Google to find an answer because Jesus demands to know what *we* think of him. The answer has to be in your own words, from your own heart. And mostly importantly, your answer has to be lived out in your own life. As Martin B. Copenhaver says in his book, *Jesus is the Question*, "This question demands not so much the insight of your mind as the allegiance of your life." (p.106)

Copenhaver further writes:

“There is no right answer to that question (though there are probably some wrong answers.) But all of the true answers have some real consequences for our lives, I think. Is Jesus a teacher? What would it mean to live as his student? Is Jesus the one who makes peace possible in the world? How can I live into his peace? Is Jesus a man arrested and put to death by the state? What does following him mean for Americans, who have the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world?”

“Who do you say that I am?” This is a question Jesus asks each of us today. What will be your answer? Whatever your answer may be, it will be subject to change. It will change as you continue to walk with Christ and grow in your relationship with him. Peter’s story is a prime example. He answered Jesus’ question with such conviction, “You are the Messiah.” But, his answer was only the beginning of his spiritual journey, his long walk with Christ, as he soon realized that his vision of Jesus as the Messiah was not what Jesus had in mind.

John Dear writes in his book, *The Questions of Jesus*, “We need to look long and hard into the story of Jesus to begin to comprehend who he really is. Only then, can we let our answer transform our lives and lead us in his footsteps toward that same paschal mystery: the cross and the resurrection.”

While we journey through this Holy Week, reading and reflecting on the story of Jesus’ suffering and death, may our answers to this question Jesus asks of each and every one of us rise in our hearts! May our answers be lived out as transformed lives. May our answers lead us in his footsteps toward the cross, so that we too may rise with him on the day of his resurrection!

Thanks be to God! Amen.