

“Knowing and Walking with Jesus” based on Mark 8:27-38 with Isaiah 50:4-9

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on September 12, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus asks, ‘Who do you all think that I am?’ and Peter responds, ‘The Messiah,’ or ‘the Christ.’ Here we are today, nearly 2,000 years from the moment we just read about, and whether you are a devout and learned Christian of many years, or you have walked through these doors or logged on for the first time, you have likely heard this word that Peter uses – Christ or Messiah. They are the same word, the first is Greek, and the other is Hebrew. For us today, they are often used like a surname, as if Jesus is his first name, and Christ, his last. And if we’re upset, he gets a middle initial. I’m still not sure where we got ‘H.’

The reality is that we are so far removed from the longing of the Jewish people at that time, that as Christians, or as people who have lived in a world influenced by Christianity, we miss the gravity, or the sheer weight of what is being said in today’s reading. Peter is not revealing here that he has figured out Jesus’s last name. Rather, he is bestowing on Jesus a title of King, ‘the Anointed One.’ And in the first century, that title has a lot of baggage to it, not the least of which is the people’s strong desire to be free from Roman rule, Roman occupation.

Recently, Claire and I have been watching a television series called, ‘The Chosen.’ If you don’t know, this is a new television series available for free on the internet, centered on the core disciples of Jesus, who are called by him to follow. This production is unlike any other Christian movie or TV series I’ve seen. The acting, the camera work, the music, and writing are all excellent. Whether you have faith or not, you may enjoy the series, just for the quality of the show. It is worth watching.

Now, as I just noted, the writing for the show to this point has been excellent. It is faithful to the scripture, but it isn’t bound to it in a wooden, inflexible way. They have created plausible and relatable backstories for Jesus’s first followers. Sure, they’ve taken some liberties with a few details and storylines, but it is clear they have scholars and pastors involved. The writing is kept in line with the gospel accounts, but it is also allowed to be relatable in new ways. I do cry a lot when watching, just because I’m imagining myself being there.

We really enjoy how the show portrays Simon, son of Jonah, the apostle who becomes Peter. We love how he relates to his peers in the group and how he relates to Jesus. Simon Peter is presented as brash & impulsive, a street wise and natural leader, who is constantly jumping to conclusions and making mistakes. In this way, the Peter of ‘The Chosen’ is very accurate to scripture. He is just like the Peter we find in today’s reading. He is wrestling with what Jesus’s identity means, in a time when he and all the Jewish people, were on high alert for a Messiah to come.

The disciples are shown having conversations about what they had expected, namely that the Messiah would come in their lifetime to overthrow the Romans. This would have been a common expectation among Jews in the first century. In the series, Peter is often trying to protect Jesus from every threat. I love the subtlety in the writing, where often Jesus will leave, and Peter puffs out his chest and says, ‘I’ll go with you.’ Peter wants to go with Jesus wherever he goes, but the impulse is not to follow Jesus, but to go out in front of him. Peter sees himself as a general protecting his king.

They haven’t yet done the scene we read today in the series, but in a way, it is constant. You see, because like in today’s reading, Peter may know what to call Jesus – Messiah – but like us today, in

that moment, he struggles to understand what it means. Simon Peter and all of the apostles in the show call Jesus the Messiah, but they do not know how that fits in to what they already believe, what they had expected, or why they still expect to come. The show may not need the scene in today's reading, because it is at the heart of the show's theme. In one way or another, it has been there, in scene after scene after scene.

And so, in today's reading, we see Peter upset at the thought of Jesus suffering and dying. Peter knows from his worldview that the dead are dead, and they are not kings. So, he does not hear, stops listening, or just ignores the resurrection part. The thought of Jesus suffering many things, being rejected, and dying, is beneath the expectations that Peter has for a Messiah. But Mark is showing us that understanding who Jesus is, is essential for what it means to be his follower. For Mark, Jesus is both the embodiment of Israel, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's passage that we read today, and the Son of Man in Daniel, the One in the throne of God, who is One with God.

It is important for us to understand, that in order to follow Jesus, we must know Jesus. The people who are being healed are unable to see Jesus for who he really is. They want him to be someone they know from the past – Elijah, John the Baptist, Or another prophet, all mere humans – but they do not see who he is. They do not recognize that he is not someone dead and come back, but the Messiah who will die, the Son of Man who will rise.

Peter rightfully declares for the apostles that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the King, but he wants a King like the world has, like Caesar, just as Israel had wanted. Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him, remind Jesus of who Peter wants him to be. But Jesus is the one who brings it back out for all the disciples to see. Jesus makes it very clear what is coming. Jesus rebukes Peter publicly so everyone knows he's wrong.

I find it interesting that Jesus says, 'Get behind me Satan' to Peter, because if we are honest, what Peter says is a temptation – Jesus is not looking forward to suffering and death. But Jesus says, 'Get behind me' and this is the same term he uses right after, when he tells all the disciples that if they want to 'get behind him,' they need to deny themselves, take up their cross, and get on the road with him to the cross and to resurrection. This is not meant to be a gloomy call to suffer needlessly.

That is the mistake Peter makes, focusing on the suffering that was predicted. Instead, we are do what the letter of James says, and what Peter eventually does: We are to take comfort that in whatever we go through, God is with us. The God of Israel is revealed in him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the Son shared in our humanity, to live as we live, and died on the cross for us, only to rise again. This is good news because it is God sharing our life, so that we might share God's life, through the Spirit in and among us.

There has been a tendency in the church to view this verse as our calling to accept suffering, but it is not meant to merely apply some meaning to the indignities of this fallen world. No, it is a call to walk with the suffering Jesus, who carries his cross for us, and all along the path we carry our cross behind him. On this path, he is not a worldly king conquering for his power, but our God working to relieve pain and suffering, and we are called to be partners on this road with him, to follow him and make this world a better place.

Our calling to suffer is not for the sake of suffering, because suffering is part of God's plan. No, suffering is what the sin of the world inflicts on us and happens even to the faithful. Taking up our cross means persevering through the suffering that comes because of the world's ways and its inability to understand Jesus. Mark's gospel reveals Jesus for who he really is and what he has done. This is so that we might grow as partners in this work to relieve suffering and reconcile to the world to him. We are to lay down our life, our identity, which is limited, and take up his, which is abundant and eternal.

Friends, the world tells us a lie, namely that we, in our identities, are what is most important. In the translation I read today, you may have noticed the word 'identity' several times. In today's culture, there is often a lot of talk about 'identity politics,' and so I use this word intentionally, but also with this caveat: *Do not apply this to someone else*. This is to be applied to ourselves first, our own identities. There are things that each of us cling to that inform how we see the world, what we value, because they contribute to who we are.

And so, the word translated Identity is the word that is usually translated as 'life' or 'soul,' In Greek it is the word 'psyche,' from which we get psychology. And it means so much more, from 'life,' 'soul' and 'breath,' to our 'identity' and very 'being.' Your psyche is who you are. The lie says that 'my freedom,' 'my rights,' 'my identity,' 'my wealth' and 'my family,' are what is most important. What's more, this lie is too often told to imply even that if we profess to be Christians, then 'my freedom, rights, identity, wealth, and family, even my country' are all things I must protect, even to the detriment of others, because I am somehow protecting these things because of my faith.

This is the same lie that Rome used to persecute Christians – putting 'my empire' first, because it protects 'my peace,' 'my security,' 'my rights,' and 'my identity.' It's the same lie that the Religious leaders used to betray and reject Jesus, because 'my power,' 'my freedom,' 'my identity,' 'my religious express,' and 'my country,' are first. All these things were threatened by Jesus, who walked along those ancient roads showing them the Kingdom of God by turning all things upside down, as Isaiah's suffering servant conquering without using the tools of this world.

What is incredible about the gospel message is that God's love is self-giving—it's faithful. You see, Jesus was not concerned about his freedom, his rights, his identity, and certainly not any measure of wealth, or even his own family or country. God in Jesus Christ became a slave, a servant, forgoing freedom for us. Friends, to be like Peter in this story is normal – it is our natural inclination. But Jesus calls us to something more – to be like him, to share in God's abundant life.

When we recognize Jesus for who he is – fully God and fully in our flesh – then we see both the holiness and love of God in him, and that we are connected to him, and thus connected to God. Jesus is for us the mediator – following him leads to God. But to follow him is not to climb a mountain, to achieve something and make our way to God. No, Jesus came down to us, to our level, so we need only to walk with him, the one who seeks us out. When we are part of Jesus's work in this world, part of the work to reconcile all things to God through Christ, then we get to see what the Kingdom of God is and will be.

This lets us look outside of ourselves for the good of others and to the will of God, looking instead at who he is that is leading us, knowing that God in Jesus has done the hard part for us. Jesus tells

us that if we try to preserve all those 'my' things. Yes, if we try to preserve our life and identity, then we will lose all of them. But if instead, we lose our life and identity with it all those 'my's', and if we do because of Jesus and the good news that God did this for us, then we will actually save our lives and identities and any 'my' that truly matters.

There is no profit in gaining all that this world says to value, only to lose our identity in Christ. This is why it matters so much to know who Jesus truly is as our God and our brother. For in Christ, we do not have a king ruling over us, who we have to protect. And in Christ, we do not have a God who is distant and apart from us. In Christ, we see God desires to connect with us, to be at our side, walking with you and me in our good times and our bad, as we help to repair this world and reconcile it to God.

Know Jesus. Follow Jesus. For this is truly good news. Amen.