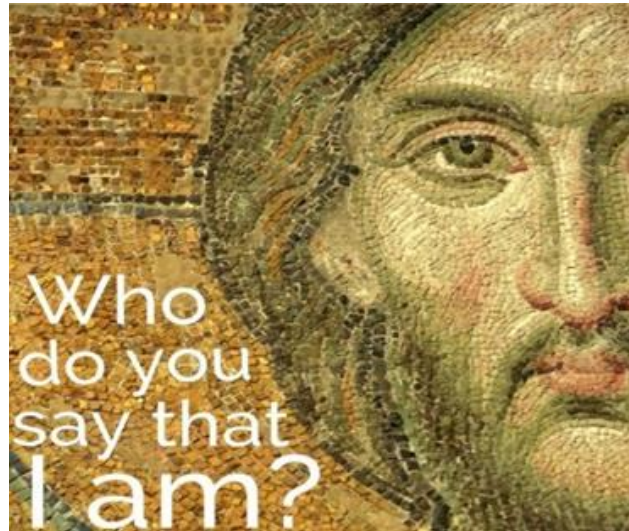


## **SERMON AUGUST 23 2020**



### **Matthew 16:13-20**

I can remember back in 1995 when Joan Osborne sang a rather haunting song “What if God was one of us?...just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home....” It was one of those songs that stay with you. Some were offended by the song. The idea of meeting God as a stranger on the bus or train seemed disrespectful especially when we are used to songs of praise and adoration of the sovereignty and greatness and wonder of who God is.

And yet if you think about it, Peter and James and John and Mary Magdalene and all those first followers of Jesus met him as Jesus of Nazareth – albeit a teacher, a rabbi, a prophet even - a man often on the road. He did not come with lofty theological statements to hand out. He did not come with a halo hovering over his head. He was one of them.

And yet he was not... From the beginning of their relationship with him they sensed that there was more to him than they could explain with the usual answers. Where did he get that extraordinary authority to speak and teach with such insight and boldness and conviction that was a breath of fresh air? How did he manage to set their hearts beating with such excitement and hope that they had dropped everything to follow him?

How was it that his prayer and his touch could bring healing to people who were sick and couldn't walk or see or hear and who had no hope? More than that, how could he free people from the demons and burdens that they carried? What kind of authority forgave people of their sins? What kind of compassion could provide a community of

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acceptance for all kinds of people, many of whom were excluded at all the other places in their society - including places of worship like the synagogue?

How could he feed the hungry – 5,000 men plus women and children with five small loaves and 2 fish and then a crowd of 4,000 with seven loaves and a few small fish? How was it that he came walking on the water and his word calmed even the wind and the waves on the lake? That was so awesome that they have already worshipped him as the Son of God!

Around Galilee some people who were outraged by Jesus' lifestyle and ministry said that he gets it from the devil. Others saw him in the tradition of the great prophets – prophets like Jeremiah and Elijah. Others found the spirit of the recently executed John the Baptist reborn in Jesus. And so the speculation grew .....

But it was in an unfamiliar place for Jesus' closest followers when Jesus finally asked them what they thought.

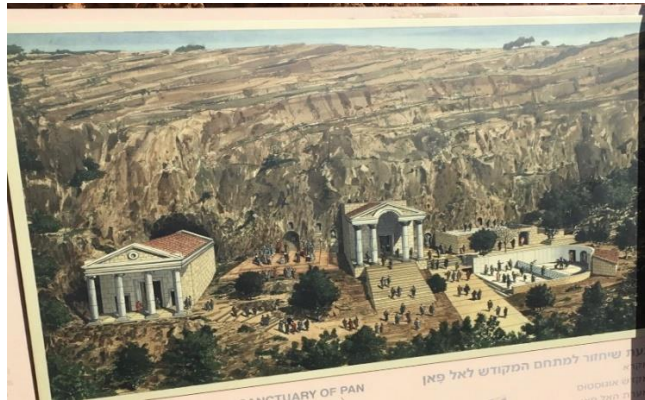


I remember visiting Caesarea Philippi when I was in the Holy Land in 2014. It's up north of Lake Galilee near the borders of Lebanon and Syria and Mount Hermon. In fact it is on an ancient trade route between Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea in the West and Damascus in Syria to the Northeast.

We were there on a hot day and it was a relief to walk under its shady trees beside pools of water. There is an amazing cave which houses a great spring that feeds one of the sources of the Jordan River. The cave and spring had long served as a sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. Greek inscriptions and niches are carved into the rock, still visible today, with dedications to other pagan gods.

There are also ruins of a temple built a couple of decades before Jesus' birth. It was built by Herod the Great near the spring in honor of Caesar Augustus.

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An Artist's impression of Caesarea Philippi in Jesus' day.

When Jesus and his disciples visited the region, Caesarea Philippi was the administrative capital of King Herod's son, Philip. By the time Matthew was writing his Gospel, his readers were probably aware that the Roman commander who led the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE had returned with his troops to Caesarea Philippi to celebrate their victory.

So when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", he is asking them in a place at the intersection of a rich economic trade route, among temples where sacrifice was offered to the gods of the Greeks and the Romans and a centre of political power.

I remember sitting on a low rocky wall along a path along steps looking across at the temple ruins and wondering if Jesus had sat there on the same rocks with his disciples. We were enjoying some iced drinks from a kiosk. Perhaps Jesus and the disciples were also taking refreshments as they took in the view when Jesus pointed to all the sights and asked "How about you? Who do you think that I am?"

And Peter says the biggest thing that he can: All that he has seen and heard and touched and felt along the way with Jesus were revelations from God. In a moment of profound insight, everything comes together in the biggest thing he has ever said: "You are the Messiah (which means God's anointed One), the Son of the living God!"

It was definitely a big call. You see to say that Jesus is the Son of God was revolutionary: The Roman Emperor Caesar himself claimed that title! This was setting Jesus up against the Roman Emperor -indeed as greater than him.

Jesus' question then is not just about who Jesus is but in whom they will place their ultimate allegiance.

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In what or in whom do they put their ultimate trust? Do they put it in all the signs of wealth and economic trade and of political power and of the gods around them there in Caesarea Philippi – in the Emperor Caesar? Or Do they put their trust in their lived experience of Jesus, the man sitting beside them and offer their allegiance to him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God?

After Peter says “You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God”, Jesus turns to him and says “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” and I can imagine him gesturing towards the cave opposite with its deep water into which sacrifices were thrown to the gods -that cave known as the Gates of hell “ as he says “and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

And there it is: Not only Jesus but his new community of people – an alternative community - his church founded upon the rock of Peter’s confession that Jesus is, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Friends, Jesus turns to you and me too and he asks “Who do **you** say that I am?”

Your answer could change your life.

John Newton lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He went to sea as a boy and ended up as a master of a ship carrying slaves from African to America. On 21 March 1748 a raging storm was blowing off the coast of Ireland. Thundering waves pounded the vessel and John and his crew felt certain the ship would break into pieces. He was not a believer and yet in terror he found himself crying out “**Lord**, have mercy on us!”



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John Newton did not die that night and the ship was saved. But he later wrote that “on that day, the Lord sent from on high and delivered me from the deep water.” Coming to know Jesus as Lord, John Newton joined the community of people founded on Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. He joined the church. He even became an Anglican priest.

Now as a follower of Jesus, John Newton saw his former trade in slaves as the most despicable and he became an activist speaking out to his government at the height of the British Empire to abolish the trade. His life was turned around. He believed in Jesus as his Lord and he wrote one of the most loved of all songs that young and old still sing

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me –  
I once was lost but now am found  
was blind but now I see!*

John Newton’s answer to the question “Who do you think I am?” was “You are my Saviour and Lord” full of grace. It changed his life. It changed his allegiances.

As a minister of the church I am constantly encouraged and inspired by our people’s trust in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God....

Sometimes they use other names and words for Jesus - names like their closest friend who walks with them every day and is there for them in their saddest times and in their best times and who never let’s them down – Some times they use the word anchor saying that Jesus keeps them grounded and steady when life is shaky – Sometimes they talk about Jesus as their light in the darkness or a torch showing them the way and teaching them how to live. Others experience Jesus as a healer who makes them whole.

They talk about him as their Saviour who has carried their burdens and their shortcomings – what we call sins - on the cross and forgiven them and given them a new start – the gift of eternal life with God.....

Many call him King and speak of his glory - because he has won victory over the power of evil and death through his own death and resurrection and shows us that love is more powerful than hate and fear .... and many have found their purpose in life through Jesus - finding acceptance in his church and caring for others and working for justice and peace.

I could go on but today Jesus asks: Who do **you** say that I am?

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I invite you to reflect - What would be your answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?"

As I pray now may it be your prayer as you feel able at this time.

***Dear Lord, help me keep my eye on you.***

***You are the expression of God's unending love and compassion. You are beauty, goodness, gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy.***

***In you, all can be found. Why should I look elsewhere or go elsewhere?***

***You have the words of eternal life. You feed me. You are the Way the Truth and the Life. You are the light on the lampstand, the house on the hilltop. In and through you I can see and find my way to the Heavenly Father.***

***Jesus, be my Lord, my Saviour, my Guide, my Friend, my Comforter, my Hope, My Joy, and my Peace. To you I want to give all that I am, think, do, and feel. It is yours, O Lord. Please accept it and make it fully your own. Amen.***

- Adapted from *A Prayer to Christ* by Henri Nouwen  
From *A Cry for Mercy* in *Seeds of Hope – A Henri Nouwen Reader* ed.  
Robert Durback, p.209

Rev'd Laurel Barr

23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2020