

Questions God Asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

3-22-15 Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

Mish minute on Cherokee by JL

There are a few moments in life when you have to decide. Are you going to do x or y? Are you on this side or that? The labor movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sang a ballad that asked repeatedly "Which side are you on?" Are you with the greedy capitalists or with the working man? In this part of the world you have to choose, you're a Duke fan, or a Carolina fan, or a State fan, but you can't really be all of them equally. Or to dip south of Carowinds it's either Clemson or South Carolina but no way it can be both. Capiche? Billy Graham and his brother-in-law Leighton Ford who will preach for us April 12 called their radio and television shows the Hour of Decision. It's time to decide, are you with Jesus Christ or without him?

We don't usually have that sort of urgency. Most of our days we have our routine, things we look forward to or try to avoid, thankfully we're not always at a crossroad where it's either left or right, no turning back. Jesus and his disciples are at such a crossroad in the story I'm about to read to you. He wants to know what they think. And when Peter gets it right Jesus praises him to the skies. Then just a few verses later Jesus rebukes him more harshly than anyone else in the gospels. It's enough to say with St. Teresa of Avila "Lord if this is how you treat your friends it's no wonder you have so few of them!"

Hear this word about Jesus' which side are you on moment. And ask yourself as we stand and sing and I read, who do you think Jesus is? And what are you doing about it in your life?

Matthew 16:13-20

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. 21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Today is part of a series of sermons on questions God asks us.<sup>1</sup> We've heard God ask us "Where are you," in Genesis. We've heard God ask through his accidental envoy Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord, that I should set Israel free?" Last week we asked with Jesus in his mother's face, "What do you have against me woman?" And this morning we see Jesus meet us with urgency in his eyes and nervousness in his voice as he asks us, "Who do you say that I am?" Let that question settle a moment. Because on it hangs everything. I remember talking to a high school classmate who was proud of being cynical about religion. I gave her a convincing account of why Jesus is Lord and why she should agree, and she said "That's great, Jesus is Lord, fine, no problem. Of course, that's no more meaningful to me than that Bonzo is a clown." I was a little more fire and

---

<sup>1</sup> Logo up plz

brimstone back then I confess, and I remember thinking, wow, she doesn't need to worry about going to hell. She's already there.

Let's back up. Jesus leads his disciples all the way to Caesarea Philippi. This is nearly as far as he'll ever get away from Jerusalem in his life. It's a significant place. In our culture if I say "what happens in Vegas"<sup>2</sup> you all know how to respond, "stays in Vegas."<sup>3</sup> I can say Myrtle Beach and you'll all think tacky neon, redneck riviera and Harleys, right? In Jesus' day Caesarea Philippi was known for a few things. There was a pagan holy place there devoted to the Greek God Pan.<sup>4</sup> And the grotto looked for all the world like an open mouth yawning down to hell. Drop a rock and you can't hear it land. It was known as, wait for it, the gates of hades, a tunnel to the underworld. Remember how we all wanted to dig a tunnel to China as kids and gave up after 2-3 feet? Well here the gods didn't give up and it seemed like it went all the way down. When Jesus says "the gates of hell" cannot stand against his church he threw a glance over his shoulder at the gaping hole behind him. Whatever you're afraid of, he says, is nothing compared to my church. The town was also known as a favorite in the Roman Empire. Caesar changed the name of the town from Pan to, well, Caesarea, humbly claiming the city for himself. With beautiful mountains and a lake it was a second home for Roman wealth and a place dedicated to the emperor. The gates of hell are there. The legions of Caesar are there. And Jesus goes and asks his disciples, surrounded as they are by the claims of other gods and other lords, who people are saying he is.

This is still a question folks bat around. Who is Jesus? C.S. Lewis answered in this remarkable way. There are only three options for Jesus. He is either a liar, or a lunatic, or Lord. There is no fourth option. Jesus claimed to be God, as he does here in our text. Nobody can claim to be divine son of God and actually just be a nice guy. That's either wrong and he knows it, in which case he's a liar, or it's wrong and he doesn't know it, in which case send in the men in the white coats. Or it's true. But let's have no more nonsense about Jesus being an enlightened teacher who loved everybody and was a good man. Lewis' actual words<sup>5</sup>

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg--or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.

I'd give a minor body part to write that well, but I have a fourth option I'm afraid. Jesus could have been wrong. He could have thought he was messiah of Israel, Lord of all, and been incorrect without being a liar or crazy. That's what usually happened when people claimed to be messiah. They died. Usually at the hands of the Romans. And when they died their people scattered and their movement disintegrated. There's a reason you've not heard of Bar Kochba. Here's why we don't think that option is true: Jesus' people multiplied after he got his. The resurrection is God's way of showing what Jesus taught was true. The cross was not the end. More on that on Easter in 2 weeks.

For now the disciples start out pretty accurately with Jesus.<sup>6</sup> "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." The disciples are usually clueless. I love to talk about how clueless the disciples are because frankly I feel clueless most of the time. But here they have a clue. Jesus

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://treasure.diylo.com/uploads/post/image/301231/resized\\_jesus-says-meme-generator-jesus-says-what-happens-in-vegas-stays-in-vegas-9abe5f.jpg](http://treasure.diylo.com/uploads/post/image/301231/resized_jesus-says-meme-generator-jesus-says-what-happens-in-vegas-stays-in-vegas-9abe5f.jpg)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.benoitlaporte.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Giant-Crab-Myrtle-Beach.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.generationword.com/images/israel\\_pictures/Caesarea\\_Philippi/gates\\_of\\_hades\\_1.jpg](http://www.generationword.com/images/israel_pictures/Caesarea_Philippi/gates_of_hades_1.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> On screen plz

<sup>6</sup> Mt 16:14 on screen plz

is a prophet like Elijah. He stands up to those in power when they do wrong. He's a prophet like Jeremiah. He tells Israel she's not as great as she thinks, in fact she's quite a sinner. He's like John the Baptist who's barely cold in his grave. Prophets make few friends. Tells someone how corrupt the government is and the church is and they might nod. Tell them how corrupt *they* are and you better duck. Here's the thing about prophets. They are lovers. Prophets are just crazy zealots on the street corner they're lovers, who want what they love to be better. James Howell my mentor in ministry points out that we Protestants fixate on belief. We want to know whether you believe in Jesus. Here's the thing. When someone says I love you they don't want to hear "I believe you do." The right response to "I love you" is not "correct." They want to hear, "I love you too." No extra credit with Jesus for believing him. The right response is "I love you too." Martin Luther King Jr. didn't criticize America because he hated it but because he loved it and wanted it better. And prophets like all four of these usually end up dead too young. Jesus is a prophet.

He is also, Simon Peter ventures, the messiah, the Christ, son of the living God. Now this is a good deal riskier. The word of the Lord comes *to* a prophet. The word of the Lord *becomes* Jesus, every word from him is God because he is God. Now let me back up again. Here's what Peter is saying. The Jews believed a new king was coming. To be anointed was to be a king. He would establish Israel again, bring justice, renew worship, kick out the Romans, and make all things right. This is what Peter meant. Jesus is messiah, Israel's true king, the son of God. To say "son of God" then was kingly speech. When David is king over Israel God says<sup>7</sup> "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." The king is the son of God. Peter is saying this town is dedicated to Caesar, but the world is dedicated to Jesus. This town has a cheap tourist destination, the gates of hell, but the real savior is Jesus. I wonder what Jesus is Lord over in our world? No president, no country, no god, no savior, no product you can buy, no university, no person you can follow is as he is. He is prophet and king and everything. Do you believe that? Which side are you on?

Peter has gotten the right answer and boy is Jesus ever impressed.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The praise is fast and furious. Can Peter have any idea what it means? What's a church? There isn't one yet at this point but Peter is in charge of it. What are keys? Jesus doesn't say. What's binding and loosing? Don't know. It's an impressive speech.<sup>9</sup> It's like when Gandalf in Fellowship of the Ring says "I am a servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Anor" before dispatching the Balrog.<sup>10</sup> Or if you're learning to drive try this version of Gandalf. What's that mean, to be servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Anor? Don't know! But it's sure impressive! And the gates of hell disintegrate.

What's this mean? I did some of this last week. The Roman Catholic Church has taken Jesus to mean that Peter is the head of the church. And that the head of the church is an office that can be passed down and still exists today. The pope of Rome.<sup>11</sup> There's the top of the dome of St. Peter's, most impressive church in the

---

<sup>7</sup> This bit of 2 Samuel 7:14 up please

<sup>8</sup> Mt 16:17-19 up please.

<sup>9</sup> <http://vignette3.wikia.nocookie.net/ayakashi-ghost-guild/images/5/5a/Cultures-escape-bulgaria-gandalf-you-shall-not-pass.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20130824161457>

<sup>10</sup> <http://i.stack.imgur.com/2BvbQ.jpg>

<sup>11</sup> <http://wp.patheos.com.s3.amazonaws.com/blogs/danpeterson/files/2012/10/Tu-es-Petrus.jpg>

world, with the Latin version of Jesus' words, you are Peter.<sup>12</sup> Pretty good church setup there. But what's it have to do with Jesus? St. Peter's was built with indulgences, when the Catholic Church sold tickets out of heaven for your dead relatives. Martin Luther said, "Excuse me?" and the church split in half. How like us Christians to have our greatest church also be our greatest church split. We Protestants have said Jesus wasn't starting a denomination. He was asking us to all do like Peter. To believe that he is God's messiah, God's Son, our savior. Hence the Billy Graham question, when were you saved? My answer, when I was baptized as a baby. Or when I gave my life to Jesus when I was 8. And again when I was 16. And when I recommitted my life at 20. And this morning when I got to church. Here's maybe the real answer to the question of when you were saved. At Golgotha 2000 years ago. The truth is I don't care when it happened before. What I want to know is this, today, who do you say Jesus is?

Peter is in the catbird seat about 30 seconds, or in bible verses, for about 2 of them.

<sup>13</sup>Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Peter's got some clout now, he's the rock on which Jesus builds his church and he's going to spend it. And Jesus' response, <sup>14</sup>"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter goes from pope to satan in about 4 verses. Why? Why was he so violently demoted after being so spectacularly promoted?

You probably didn't know this bit of Methodist trivia. In 2004 3 of the 4 names on the presidential ballot were Methodists—George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and John Edwards. Pretty cool. Except it gave folks reason to threaten to excommunicate them. Folks who didn't like W's wars said the Methodist church should kick Bush and Cheney out. Folks who didn't like Edwards on abortion said the Methodist Church should kick him out. Note—when did the Methodist church last excommunicate someone? Like never. In other words, folks wanted to use the church to score points, votes. And I'm guessing Jesus said "get behind me satan." As soon as we human beings see power, money, status, we grab for it. But Jesus' definition of power is to give it away, to serve, to give himself up, to die. Not a crown but a cross. Any takers, for that? You sure you're on the right side?

*Dead Man Walking* is a favorite movie. Films are terrible at portraying Christian conversion but this one gets it right. It's about a murderer ministered to by a nun. Susan Sarandon asks Sean Penn if he reads the bible in his cell. He says yes. She asks if he read about Jesus and what he thinks of him. He says he was a good man, imprisoned, Son of God. "Kind of like me," he says. And she shrinks in horror. "No, not at all like you." Jesus forgives, we all need his forgiveness, and whatever we've done we can be forgiven, but we're not innocent, none of us is. And we all need to decide.

We don't believe in God in general.<sup>1</sup> We don't believe in God first and then tack Jesus onto that. What we do, who we are, is people convinced Jesus is life. Whatever comes we want to follow him. When he says to take up his cross and march with him to his death we don't take him aside and try to talk him out of it. We set our faces toward Jerusalem too and follow. Because whatever way he's on, even if it looks like death, it's actually life. And whatever way he's not on, even if it looks like life, is really death.

---

<sup>12</sup> [http://rly.zcache.com/shafts\\_of\\_light\\_inside\\_st\\_peters\\_basilica\\_postcard-re7074ba4ec1f4cdfaa8bfdcd816560de\\_vgbaq\\_8byvr\\_512.jpg](http://rly.zcache.com/shafts_of_light_inside_st_peters_basilica_postcard-re7074ba4ec1f4cdfaa8bfdcd816560de_vgbaq_8byvr_512.jpg)

<sup>13</sup> Mt 16:21-22 up plz

<sup>14</sup> This from Mt 16:23 up please.

So I'm going to ask you the most important question you'll ever be asked. Are you ready? Who do you say Jesus is? Your answer to that question is a matter of life or death. Choose life friends. Because life, Jesus, has already chosen you. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> I owe this paragraph to Fred Craddock—may his memory be eternal.