

Sunday, March 6, 2022

The Four Words of Gospel

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")

(Message One)

Scripture:

²⁷Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

³⁰Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³²He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

³⁴Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:27-38)

Message:

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. This year during Lent we will take a look at "*The Gospel according to **Peter***."

Scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel written. The Gospel of Mark is based on the **teaching** and **preaching** of Peter. When Peter went to Rome, Mark accompanied Peter as his companion and "secretary."

Mark writes his Gospel of Jesus as Peter preached it. After Peter's death in Rome, Mark went to Alexandria (Egypt) and became the church's first bishop.

No one had ever written a "**Gospel**" until Mark; it quickly became foundational (the other Gospels are based on it) and formative in receiving and living the Christian life.

- *Gospel* is a **story** that invites us into a world other than and larger than ourselves; a world of creation, salvation, and blessing; a world of transformation and awe...
- *Gospel* is an incarnational story, a flesh-and-blood **on-the-ground** story, a story that is worked out in time and space and actual lives...
- *Gospel* is a story where we clearly see **God at work** in the everydayness of history...

Line after line, page after page, it is the story of Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! Life and Jesus. Life with Jesus! Life in Jesus!

Christianity is built on the person of Jesus Christ and our relationship with him. We call ourselves Christians, but how often do we actually **talk** about **Jesus** Christ?

A few years ago, *Time* interviewed the two dozen most influential church leaders in the evangelical world. They all talked about their churches and ministries; only one mentioned Jesus.

We talk more about our worship style, the preaching, the budget, and the facility than we talk about Jesus. In the church foyer before and after worship, Jesus' name is seldom mentioned. About the only time we name him is when we conclude our prayers.

This passage today reminds us of the priority and centrality of Jesus in all of life – not just our spiritual life - something sadly missing among North American believers and churches.

Immersing ourselves in the company of Peter, the apostle who declared Jesus to be the Christ, the incarnation of the Godhead, is a way to embrace the Word in the flesh.

We need a **Jesus'-soaked** focus so that every truth becomes a **lived truth** – lived in our homes, businesses, schools, and marketplaces day in and day out. All living is local: this land, this neighborhood, this workplace, these people.

This passage at Caesarea Philippi marks the watershed of Mark's gospel. It is the outcome of what has gone before; it is the foundation of what will follow. The first half of Mark's Gospel is filled with the mighty works of Jesus validating him as *Messiah*; this transitional passage moves us from observation to participation, from confession to commitment – a transition

from follower to disciple we all need to make.

The shadow of the cross now falls across the remaining pages of this Gospel. The blinders will be lifted, and we'll see Jesus for who he is.

THE CITY (8:27)

“Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi.”

After walking for **twenty-five** miles through a number of villages, they come to Caesarea Philippi. When you walk, especially with others, you tend not to hurry; there is time for conversation, time for observation, time for reflection. No doubt, questions were asked on this walk; the conversations were with and about Jesus and what was going on in the world.

Jesus leads his twelve followers north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi - the **capital** of Herod Philip's Tetrarchy which he named after himself and Caesar Augustus - the one who claimed to be Savior, Lord, and “*a son of god.*” Caesarea Philippi lay at the foot of Mount **Hermon (map)**, near the Old Testament city of **Dan**.

Caesarea Philippi was built at the base of a cliff, centered around a large **cave** from which a huge **spring** flowed... **(pictures)**. It was a place of natural beauty.

Jesus bringing his disciples to Caesarea Philippi would have surprised the disciples; it would have been their parents' worst nightmare (like Pastor Henry taking the youth group to Mardi Gras ☺).

This city and its **pagan** religious **practices** are vastly different from Galilee and anything these Jewish disciples' (likely in their mid-teens) had ever experienced.

Back in Old Testament, Israelite King Jeroboam had turned this area into a center of **Ba'al** worship, built a “high place” that angered God, and led Israelites to worship false gods. They called the place *Balinas*.

Eventually the worship of Ba'al, the Canaanite fertility god, was replaced with the worship of the Greek fertility god, **Pan**; the city renamed *Panias* in his honor.

The pagans believed their gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring (when the weather got nice) traveling to and from the earth through the caves and/or water. The cave opening and spring at Caesarea Philippi was considered the **gate** to and from the **underworld** (known as the “Gates of Hades or the “Gates of Hell”).

On the cliff above the city and on the sides of Mount Hermon over twenty

temples have been discovered.

To entice the return of their god, Pan, the people of Caesarea Philippi (and thousands of others) annually celebrated a weeklong feast including prostitution and sex between humans and goats. (The god Pan had the torso of a man and the hind quarters of a goat; so, it was considered having sex with the gods!)

Caesarea Philippi was literally knocking on the “gates of hell; it was a “red-light district.” Devout Jews would never enter the city; but where a **rabbi** goes, his **disciples** follow.

THE CHOICE (8:27B-28)

Jesus asks an **important** question: “*Who do people say that I am?*”

I imagine this as an ongoing **conversation** among the disciples. (Simply reading this, we tend to think this is a two-minute conversation--it only takes about twenty seconds to read.) I tend to think this is an extended conversation of which we have the “Cliff Notes.”

“Well, some say John the Baptist?”

“Really? Why do you think they would say that?”

“Well, both of you preach repentance.”

“John, risen from the dead! Interesting.”

“Anyone hear anything else?”

“Well, some say Elijah because the prophet (Malachi 4:5) says he’d come before the great and horrible day of the Lord.”

(In Orthodox Judaism, a chair is set out for Elijah at the annual Passover feast. They expect him to return; some are saying, “This is Elijah;” he has arrived!)

“We’ve heard others say, ‘He is one of the Prophets...like Jeremiah or maybe Isaiah.’”

People had actually been saying these things for some time (cf. **Mark 6**). So in the crowd’s perception, not much had changed for the crowd. Yet, the responses show they held Jesus in high esteem; to be known as “*one of the prophets*” was a high honor...yet...they didn’t view Jesus as the *final* Word. So after three years of knowing about and listening to Jesus, the crowds still don’t have an inkling of who Jesus really is.

But - then, who the **crowd** says Jesus is - is not really the point of Jesus’ questions. For the disciples, these first answers are easy; they were purely descriptive. They require little thought, no risk, no commitment, just an information exchange. A lot of people, even today, recognize Jesus as a good man, a wonderful teacher, a man to be modeled.

Now Jesus **raises the bar** for his disciples: “*Who do you say that I am?*”

Standing in front of these pagan temples, within view and hearing of everything the world has to offer, Jesus asks the fundamental question of **life** and **death**.

If they answer John, Elijah, or one of the prophets, life will remain fairly simple. Prophets are fairly ordinary people. Listeners can decide about their relationship with them; they can choose whether or not to respond to their message and how to respond.

But if they answer, “The Messiah”, their life will be turned upside down. Saying “Messiah” (Hebrew) or “**Christ**” (Greek) is the equivalent of saying Jesus is the Son of God, i.e., he is God’s anointed ruler. That statement demands obedience; if Jesus is Messiah, he cannot be ignored! You cannot say “Lord” and “no” or “not now” in the same sentence.

The **contrast** is stark and unavoidable: **Jesus**, the true and living God in the flesh, or the “**dead**” gods the pagans were pinning their false hopes on. You choose.

THE CONFESSION (8:29)

Again, this is a Cliff’s Notes summary; the question is asked. You know this is a big one. You think you know the answer, but you’re not 100% sure. You don’t want to look foolish, so you remain quiet...head down. You don’t want to get called on.

Up until this point, Jesus has never identified himself as **Messiah**. They have watched him closely, but they have missed some powerful hints:

- In **Mark 4**, Jesus stilled the **storm** and the disciples asked, “*Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?*” (Hint: only God can do that!)
- In **Mark 5**, Jesus raises a young girl from the **dead**! “*They were completely astonished.*” But they didn’t connect the dots. (Hint: Only God can do this!)
- In **Mark 6** and **8**, Jesus provides **bread** for thousands. “*Who ultimately provides bread?*” (Hint: only God can do that!)
- In **Mark 7**, Jesus **walked** on the water. “*They were completely amazed.*” Again they missed the obvious truth. (Hint: Only God can do this.)

And they know the Scriptures. The lame walk; the deaf hear; the blind see; the prisoner is freed...

Then Peter breaks the silence with a **declaration of faith**: “*You are the Christ, The Son of the Living God.*” Messiah (Christ) is not his name (Jesus is his name); it is his title, an office. **Christ** literally means, “The **anointed** one.” It

reflects the custom of pouring oil over the head of a priest, a prophet or a king to symbolize God's presence and call.

Peter confesses Jesus is the promised one who will rule over all the nations!

This is a significant breakthrough. They **understand** who Messiah is even if they still don't fully grasp the implications of their confession.

Remember the two-step process Jesus just used to heal the blind man outside Bethsaida? (cf. **Mark 8:22-26**) This was the equivalent of the first touch in following Jesus; we must understand who Messiah is. We confess who Jesus is—the Christ, Son of God.

The second step awaits...

Here in this thoroughly pagan place where Pan was considered god and Caesar was said to be lord, Jesus asks his disciples to commit their lives to him.

Matthew's [**16:13f**] emphasis is on building a church in the world that would overcome the worst evils. But here in **Mark 8 (and Luke 9)**, the emphasis is on building disciples who recognize Jesus and are willing to follow him (Disciples = Church).

In a city filled with false gods and pagan distractions, Jesus asks his followers to **commit to him**—the one true God. While false gods promise prosperity and happiness, they never deliver; Jesus never promises prosperity, instead, he provides salvation—the only prosperity that matters.

THE CHARGE (8:30)

At this point you might expect Jesus to congratulate the disciples: *"Well done gentlemen; after all this time you finally got it right!"*

Instead, Jesus charges (the Greek here literally means "**rebukes**") his disciples to tell no one.

Excuse me! They finally recognize Jesus for who he is! Why not send them into the countryside and have them tell the world? Because they had only made a **confession**; they have not made a **commitment** – not yet.

Jesus appears to be concerned, not ecstatic. The reason: they only understand "dimly" what his being Messiah will mean for them. Even though they (Peter) correctly **identified** Jesus as the Messiah, they are not yet **following** him as their Lord; they have not yet **suffered for him**.

The Jews understood the title, Messiah, as the highest political office in Judaism. They had been taught that in a time of terrible tribulation, Elijah would return to announce Messiah's coming. Messiah would come and defeat their enemies and restore Israel to their glory and Jerusalem would be the

center or capital of the world.

That's what the disciples had learned and longed for. Jesus wants to put some distance between himself and the politically loaded title. (It is a sad day when the politics of this world become entwined with the power of God's Kingdom.)

Jesus begins the task immediately...and in earnest (the very next verse!). A "second touch" is necessary to understand what following Messiah really means; a clearer picture is necessary, before they can tell others.

They had been awed by his power, fascinated by his teaching, overwhelmed by his compassion...but they still didn't understand what he was all about.

Jesus, the Messiah, is not going to take up a crown...but a cross.

Jesus wastes no time in adding: "*The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this ...*" (**Mark 8:31-32a**).

It's not the way they (we) envisioned it; but it is God's way, and it's in God's time. How often don't we long to make God in our image?

THE CHALLENGE (8:31-35)

Then Jesus gets to the bottom line: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" (Mark 8:34b). The bottom line is **discipleship. Are you going to follow?**

Jesus knows what is ahead for his disciples. They'll face **ridicule**, hostility, **persecution**, even death as they identify with Jesus. They will be confronted by evil, by the worst the world has to offer. What they, and the disciples who follow them, will face, will require a deep commitment to follow in Jesus' footsteps, divine strength, and righteous and holy living. But as Jesus knows, if they can make their profession and commitment here in Caesarea Philippi, where evil is thoroughly pervasive, they'll be able to do it elsewhere.

Jesus: Whoever comes with me must let me lead. Don't run from suffering, **embrace** it. A life without sacrifice is not a **Christ-like** life. You must follow in my footsteps...even the ones that lead to a cross

Jesus: "*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*" (**8:35**).

In a culture today that embraces moral diversity and demands political correctness, some consider it offensive to suggest, practice, teach and preach certain truths as timeless and universal (i.e., apply to everyone).

Obedient disciples of Jesus are often labeled as **myopic** and **intolerant** for

refusing to accept and adopt to the times and conform their behaviors and ideas to the ever-changing culture.

Sadly, many have embraced a distorted Christianity that tries to be “**politically correct**.” So as not to offend anyone, many will tolerate sin and affirm disobedience rather than live counter-culturally. Christians often talk about “love,” but “love” ultimately rings empty when we also tolerate sin and falsehoods that ruin people’s lives.

Other Christians try to **avoid** the world and its culture altogether. They hide in their churches, schools, and homes and try to shut the door on the evil influences of culture.

Jesus offers a third option: go, boldly **proclaim** the **truth** with courage. Churches, schools, and homes should be staging areas rather than fortresses; we need places that equip God’s people to engage the world instead of hiding from it, to be in the world but not overcome by it – as Jesus illustrates in this visit to Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus knows that the pagan world will resist, but he challenges us to go there anyway—to those very places that are most morally decayed – to the Caesarea Philippis of our day. Where are the Caesarea Philippis of our day?

When we talk to people about Christianity, one of the oldest tricks people use to diffuse our conversations is to talk about what Christians did to Muslims and Jews in the crusades or with apartheid.

These things are not insignificant, but Christianity does not stand or fall on whether the Spanish Inquisition – or was right or wrong. Christianity stands or falls on whether **Jesus** Christ is who he **says** he is.

Christianity stands on Christ’s disciples **confirming** his claims and **living** under his Lordship. It stands on our **loving God** and our **neighbor** with our whole heart. Christianity calls us from mere confession to full commitment of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Christianity requires we make the “*Four Words of Gospel*” evident in our life.

Do you have an answer? “Who do *you* say he is?” Can people **tell?**