

Caesarea Philippi isn't far north from the Sea of Galilee and close to the Lebanese border. Jesus asks questions this morning near the border. The border is where differences bump into one another. One race of people bumps into another race. One language bumps into another language. One religion bumps into another religion. One perspective bumps into another perspective. Caesarea Philippi has always been that kind of place and that's exactly where Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" The location matters a lot. If you stand among people who agree with you, you don't have to work very hard at an answer. It is not so easy at Caesarea Philippi. It is far from the holy city of Jerusalem. It is a long way from the centre of Jewish theology and law. When we move beyond the edge of safe territory, there are issues that come when different kinds of people bump into one another. There are land disputes, mixed marriages, and unusual business alliances. There are squabbles over foreigners and immigrants, who belongs and who doesn't belong. There are many opinions, religious and otherwise. Have you spent any time in such a place? It may be closer than you think. Welcome to Caesarea Philippi. Up near the border, far from the centre, surrounded by people who are different and when he gets there, Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" For if we want to understand today's Gospel, we can't merely answer the question, we have to pay attention to where we are.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus frequently works around the borders. He lives on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, a fresh - water lake that is fished by Gentiles and Jews. The Temple police don't travel from Jerusalem very often and there are competing ideas about religion. On the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, archaeologists have uncovered a first century synagogue. In the mosaic on the floor there are Greek zodiac symbols, suggesting some of the Jews were having a hard time worshipping the God of Israel without some other stuff creeping in. Caesarea Philippi is another 25 miles north of there, thick in Gentile territory. I am sure when Jesus took the twelve disciples up there, some of them were wondering, "Why is he taking good Jewish boys to a pagan destination?" For 300 years, the spiritual tourists had been going to Caesarea Philippi to worship the Greek god Pan. You may remember the pictures: Pan was half-goat and half-human. According to the stories, he specialised in adventures - especially among the shepherds and their daughters. This was a pleasure place for the pagans and right there, Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" The name "Caesarea Philippi" comes from Caesar and Philip. Caesar was the emperor of Rome. King Philip was from the King Herod family and he gave it that name. It was a famous spot for the empire in all of its affluence and over- priced protection. Along a huge stone cliff, there are a couple of grottoes where statues once were placed. Inside the grottoes were the ancient inscriptions of the big donors who gave huge sums of money to set up this spot. Their names are written down in the stonewall of that important, powerful place and in the shadow of all that prestige and power, Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" That's not all about Caesarea Philippi. As you may remember from the pictures, the Greek god Pan played a little wooden flute. Everybody who heard it felt "panic" (that's where the word comes from). Pan was the god of panic. Whenever people felt a sudden fear in a lonely place, they said it came from Pan. If you didn't feel fear, you could see it in a large cave with a deep hole. The cave was so deep that the ancient people thought it went all the way down to the underworld, and from there, slithered up all the fears and troubles of the world. Standing near by the mouth of that cave Jesus said, "And who do you say that I am?"

The question matters but the location sharpens the answer. Jesus took his followers to a place where people worshipped pleasure, power, and panic - and he looks them in the eye to ask, "Who do you say that I am?"

The context is important. He doesn't ask this question back in Galilee, or in a safe little church. He asks it out there on the street and the question still dangles in the air: Who is Jesus for us, right now, in the midst of competing claims and allegiances? Who is Jesus for us, for the Christians, when the world wants to offer the same old, tired remedies - pleasure, power, panic.

Along the way, he has already taken a survey of the popular opinions of his time. Some say he's John the Baptist, back from the dead. Others say he is Elijah, Version 2.0. Some say he is one of the old prophets, reloaded and recycled. That is to say, people think there's nothing new about him. He speaks on behalf of God. He does a couple of unusual holy things. There's something mysterious or pious about him and it reminds them of old-time religion. For a lot of the people, that's all he is. Jesus is not surprised how so many people can float around him and never really tune in to the immensity of what God is doing.

The Gospel of Mark is clear about God's mission. The heavens have been ripped open from the other side and this grace and power spills out of Jesus. He drives out the unruly powers of destruction. He loves the unlovable and touches the untouchable. He raises the dead child and cures the person paralysed by sin. He muzzles the random meanness of nature and creates abundant bread from human generosity. Something unimaginable is here in Jesus. It is a new day and yet some dismiss it as the same old thing: "He's John, or he's Elijah, or he's Isaiah or Jeremiah or some other preacher."

Now in Caesarea Philippi, everything slides into focus for a moment. In a place filled with shrines to pleasure, power, or panic, Jesus pops the question to those who have left everything to follow him: "And who do you say that I am?" Peter says, "You are the Messiah. You are the Christ." You are the One who rescues a world in danger. You are the ideal leader that Israel has been hoping for. You are the chosen one to bring peace, wisdom, righteousness, and prosperity. And Peter must be correct because Jesus says, "Shh! Don't tell anybody." This is the gospel of Mark, after all, with its secret Jesus. I mean no disrespect by that. I simply mean we have to do more than simply say the right words. We have to trust in them, act on them, and join in Christ's life-giving mission. Think about the places where the question surfaces:

Who is Jesus Christ for you when you attack something you don't like?

Who is Jesus Christ for you, when the student in your classroom turns up with strange bruises on her back?

Who is Jesus Christ for you, when your mother is dying after three years of not remembering your name?

Who is Jesus Christ for you, when you play games with people's lives?

Who is Jesus Christ for you, when the people around you care only about the next holiday, high-priced show, or pursuit of their own comfort?

Who is Jesus Christ for you, when the television news channel stirs up panic in order to get good ratings or pursue an agenda?

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the Saviour. Both the question and the answer come in the middle of a lot of other things.

As you know from hearing this story before, in Caesarea Philippi, Peter doesn't quite get it right. He says the right word: "Messiah," but he is stuck in the world's old point of view. He thinks that a Saviour provides for our pleasure by exerting a lot of power. When Jesus speaks of his cross, Peter panics. How can the Messiah of the world have his life taken from him?

Who do you say Jesus is? He is the one who steps into a world in pain, who takes the world's pain upon himself, and he transforms it into the love and justice of God. He calls us to join him in picking up the cross, handing over the world's broken pieces into God's wounded hands, and loving and serving until everybody knows who Jesus is.

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