

Mark 8

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went into the villages near Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

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

²⁹ He asked them, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Human One^[a] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead." ³² He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. ³³ Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

³⁴ After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. ³⁵ All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. ³⁶ Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? ³⁷ What will people give in exchange for their lives? ³⁸ Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One^[b] will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Today we begin a three-week series called, “Who is Jesus? Who are we?” You see, at this point in the lectionary, we walk through some key passages in the Gospel of Mark that point to the core identity of Jesus of Nazareth. We see Jesus as someone more than a rabbi, even more than a prophet or revolutionary leader. What’s more, when we look through the lens of Jesus’ life, we also see what we’re called to be, *who* we’re called to be, in light of Jesus’ life.

Of course, today’s not the easiest place to start. We hear in the Gospel that the Human One, a prophetic name for the Christ, the Messiah, will suffer at the hands of Israel’s leaders, will die, and then will rise from the dead. The first part is less than exciting, and the last part is hardly believable. Then we hear that, as followers of Jesus, we also

must take up our crosses, bear the instruments of Roman torture and capital punishment, and follow Jesus to that fateful end. Yeesh.

When I was a kid, I got up early for the bus. I mean EARLY. Before the sun style early. I was the first pickup on the longest bus route in our whole school system, so I was on the bus more than an hour before the first bell rang. But here's the thing. Every day I got up, every day, my dad was already up, and most often, already gone to work. As I waited for the bus and watched Alanis Morsette and Smashmouth on VH1, back when VH1 still showed music videos, dad was already hard at work well before 7am. As a small business owner, he turned the lights on at Marshallville Packing every day. And he shut them off every night, so he didn't get home till nearly 6:30 every evening, long after I returned from the "burdens" of school, golf practice, and theatre rehearsal. He bore something, something he didn't

have to, something I didn't understand at the time. I'd even tell dad that, since he owned the business, he should hire someone to do all that stuff. I clearly didn't understand the magnitude or meaning of the work he did. Surely it wasn't the same enormity or pain of the cross, but it was a kind of suffering for dad to endure, to spend more than twelve hours a day away from home, away from family, to ensure that home and family had enough, to ensure that we had a future, to ensure that we had an abundant life.

Obviously Peter didn't understand the kind of suffering Jesus had to undertake either, and so he too told Jesus that he didn't have to do it, he didn't have to suffer, he didn't have to die. Fortunately for me, dad's rebukes were much nicer than Jesus' to Peter. Get behind me Satan?!?! Jesus is UP. SET. Why do we think that is? Often times, when we discuss this passage, we talk about Peter overstepping his bounds, not knowing his role, which is surely a part of it. We

speaking of Peter misunderstanding the very nature of what it means to be the Messiah, to be the Christ, which is surely part of it. But what if Jesus is upset because Peter understands this level of suffering? What if Jesus is emotional because this is a temptation to forsake his identity as the Christ? What if, despite his desire to bring salvation to all humanity, Jesus doesn't want to die, and so can't handle one of his best friends trying to prevent him from walking down that road?

Think to the times when someone challenged something close to your core, whether a deeply held belief, a long-term family practice, perhaps a religious or political commitment. Often when this happens we react with emotion, with defense, with a visceral fight or flight instinct. We react this way because we feel our identity being challenged. When someone challenges our purpose, our trajectory in life, our definition of who we think we are, we

react emphatically, telling our tempters to get behind us. And indeed, the name Satan means an adversary, a tempter to follow the wrong roads.

To avoid the cross, to leave humanity to our own faulty volitions that bring us only more sin and death, works against the very identity of Jesus. What is that identity? Exactly what Peter names it, the Christ. That's right, Christ isn't Jesus' last name. He's not the son of Joseph and Mary Christ. Christ is the Greek word for Messiah, and to tempt Jesus away from walking the path of the Cross is to challenge his very identity. Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of all humanity, the Deliverer from bondage to sin and into freedom for abundant life. Jesus is the Christ, and so this means that Jesus' identity is one of selfless sacrifice to deliver humanity, whatever the price. What does this tell us as a church? It tells us something about our allegiance, our direction, and our identity.

Jesus is the Christ, and this means that there is no other savior to whom we owe allegiance. No political power can save us, whether Trump or Clinton or anyone on the ticket. And apparently definitely not Rick Perry. Even as God calls us to work for the good in the political processes of our countries, we must always keep close to our hearts the remembrance that God is our Savior, God is the one who promises and delivers eternal life, and so our allegiance belongs to Christ over all political powers.

The same is true of things. There is no thing, no experience, nothing apart from Christ that can give us life, that can deliver us from our sin and into forgiveness and freedom. I was talking with some of you recently about how hard it is for us to get rid of the things that we own and a big part of that is because we fear what life will be like without those things – because nothing about twenty years of back newspapers or a storage unit full of unused furniture helps us

in the day to day lives we lead – and so we become slaves to the commodities in our lives. But if Jesus is the Christ, then these things cannot deliver us from our fear, our shame, our boredom, our isolation. Only Jesus can, and so we are freed from our bondage to things and instead allied to Jesus in the freedom of Christ.

Jesus is the Christ, and this means that our direction is the future, into the Kingdom of God. So often we become bogged down in the past. Sometimes it's the pain of the past, caused by the faults of others or our own failures, that still nags at our minds, telling us we're doomed to fail. Sometimes it's the struggles of the present, that we compensate for by living in the past, something like "Peaked in High School Rob Lowe" from the recent DirecTV commercials, which tells us life will never, ever be as good as it once was. Yet, Jesus has saved us from the sin of the past and the sin of the present, delivered us from

yesterday's suffering and today's pain, which frees us to live into the future as stewards of Christ's grace. The present and the future are filled with hope because, in Jesus Christ, there's always a promise for deliverance, for growth in grace.

We said this just last week, but it bears saying again. God speaks two phrases in the Bible more often than any others: Don't fear, and remember. As Jesus brings salvation to us, we're called to live not out of shame of the past or fear of the present but in courage toward the future. Even as we do that, we're called to remember, not forsaking the past altogether, but remembering God's faithfulness in the past to free us from shame, to give us reason for courage instead of fear, so that we enter the future as people of God, shaped by God, saved by God, and sent by God.

As our allegiance lies with Christ, as we live into the future, we do so as Jesus' emissaries, as Gods'

representatives. Jesus is the Christ, and we are little Christs. C.S. Lewis first used this term in *Mere Christianity*, where he wrote, "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else." This might seem a bit hyperbolic, but think about it. We call ourselves Christians, a word that literally means Christ follower. We've taken our identifying name after Jesus Christ, after the identity of Jesus as God's Son, the one sent to bring salvation to creation.

Just as we use that name to identify ourselves, we must allow that name of Christ and that person of Christ to shape our identities into little Christ. We're called to look, live, and love more like Jesus, and that means, above all else, seeking the good for others over goods for ourselves. Take this icon for example, an image based on Jesus' saying, "I am the Vine and you are the branches." Branches become like the vine, bearing the fruit of the vine, accomplishing the

purpose of the vine, looking and acting like the vine, and accomplishing the mission of that vine in the world. Down to the very DNA, the branches are little vines, and so we are to become little Christs.

And that brings us back around to Jesus' identity in this interaction with Peter. When something gets in our way of helping others, of self-sacrifice in order to promote abundant life, of becoming self-sacrificial vines connected to the self-sacrificial branch of Jesus, we too must tell that tempter to get behind us. We must remind those temptations that our allegiance already belongs to Christ, who walks before us, and so we won't sell out our faith to political agendas or family feuds. We must remind those temptations that our future belongs to Christ, and so we won't be dominated by the failures or successes of our pasts. We must remind those temptations that we belong to Christ and are becoming little Christs, and so all other

identities must become subject to the identity we receive in baptism, as we are grafted in as vines on the branch of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our identities are becoming mirrors of Jesus, reflecting the work of redemption to all creation.

And then, we live for the world. If we are to become little Christ's, we must trade our self serving identities for one typified by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We must be Christians before we are Democrats or Republicans or Hokies or Buckeyes or introverts or extroverts or vegetarians or omnivores or capitalists or communists or just war theorists or pacifists or universal healthcare advocates or small government defendants. Now, we might end up supporting some of these positions because we are little Christs, and we will become convicted that we can no longer hold some of these positions as a Christian. But in all situations, our first identity is that of a little Christ in the world,

and all other commitments must flow from that source of life that is Jesus Christ.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Christ, the one who brings salvation and abundant life to all creation. Who are we? Little Christs, who bring that promise of salvation and actions of abundant life to the world, so that all might find the abundant life Jesus promised. As vines on his branch, we are the little Christs who live the life of Jesus the Christ. What does this mean? Jesus lives to save the world, and so should we. Amen.