

CLOSING SERMON: “WHO IS JESUS?” MARK 8:27-30
General Superintendent David Busic

We have gathered as a global church over these last three days to discuss, wrestle, and pray about the theology of our church: specifically, what it means to be a holiness people centered in Christ.

On behalf of the Board of General Superintendents, I want to thank all of you for what you have contributed this week. You are a gift to the Church. Thank you for loving God with all your *hearts* and all your *minds* and for loving your church as yourself. We are grateful for your consecrated lives and how we are learning how to be the people of God together.

Mark 8:27-30

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and ON THE WAY he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

A few years ago, I was on a flight from Kansas City to Los Angeles. There was a woman sitting next to me, and as often happens we began to talk about our lives. She told me that she was a movie director from Hollywood. (I couldn’t help but wonder how successful her career had been in the movie industry since she was riding in economy coach with me . . . but I didn’t mention that. Some things are better left unsaid. ☺) Then she asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a pastor, and suddenly the conversation took a dramatic turn. Her face turned bright red and her voice became elevated.

She told me she was definitely NOT a Christian and began to share her disdain for **everything evangelical**: including the religious right; and people who picket funerals and blow up abortion clinics; and who support the death penalty; and vote for gun legislation; and lots of other things she mentioned, all because I said I was a pastor. When she realized, I wasn’t going to fight back, she began to calm down and quietly said: “*Christianity changed my grandfather. When he became a Christian, he was never any fun anymore. He lost his joy and nothing was ever the same in our family.*” And for the next hour we talked about the difference between religion and Jesus.

There is a difference, you know, between religion and Jesus. Religion as a set of rules to maintain, and as standards to meet, can become oppressive and beat people down. But religion is not the gospel. The gospel is GOOD NEWS that brings freedom and life through a real relationship.

The Christian gospel is not first a truth to be believed — it is an *invitation* to meet the one true and living God in Jesus Christ.

- He is the Way who shows us the way
- He is the Truth who reveals what is true
- He is the Life who gives us life

Or as Tom Noble reminds us: *“Salvation is being personally united to a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

I’m haunted by what Fleming Rutledge has written: *“We have not become a secular society so much as we have become a generically religious one. AND THAT Popular religion tends to be an unholy blend of whatever presents itself.”* As a result, the newest forms of spirituality are typically highly individualistic, self-referential, self-indulgent, and only barely related to the history or tradition of ANY world religion, much less to Christianity. And so, in such a time as this, we believe there is no more important calling for the church in our time than reclaiming the self-identification of the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is this God of which we speak? In her book, *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge writes:

God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

This is God’s self-identification. This is the way God chooses to be known (Ex 3:6). The particularity of this God is startling; the God of Israel aligns himself with specific human beings with individual names who live in identifiable places on the map. People with life stories that are imperfect, messy, and by no means always edifying.

This God, unlike the gods of religion, has chosen of his own sovereign will (free will, I might add) to select a distinct group of people simply because he chooses to do so. The “irreligiousness” of this choosing is that it has nothing to do with any spiritual accomplishments by the chosen ones. Instead, they are selected in spite of themselves! For if there is one thing certain about the children of Israel, it is that they did not deserve their election.

This undeserved, grace-filled, “chosen-ness” is palpable whenever God is called “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

God is the God revealed most fully and definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

It is this astonishing fact that displays the uniqueness of the God proclaimed in the Bible. Resurrection in and of itself was not unheard of; after all, stories of gods who died and rose again were told everywhere in the ancient world. But the unique feature of Christian proclamation is the shocking claim that God is fully acting, not only in Jesus’ resurrected life, but especially in Jesus’ death on the cross.

To say it another way, the death of Jesus in and of itself would not be anything remarkable. Lots of people in the Roman world were crucified. But what is remarkable is that the Creator of the cosmos is revealed, unveiled, and made known in the suffering life and atoning death of Jesus of Nazareth.

God is the Triune God

One God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus of Nazareth was not a randomly disconnected holy man. If he is not the second person of the Trinitarian Godhead and the only begotten Son of the Father, then God’s self was not directly involved on the Cross.

The Nicæan and Chalcedonian definitions remain the standard by which we test all our Christological assumptions: Jesus was of one substance with the Father and was both fully divine and fully human — not half one and half the other — fully both. Which means the beauty of the Christ event finds its meaning in the fact that the three-personal God is directly acting as ONE throughout the entire sequence from creation to incarnation to crucifixion to ascension and to the final eschaton.

Father-Son-and Holy Spirit in the divine interdependent dance. Which ultimately means that our Christology can never be independent from our Theology and Pneumatology – and that our ecclesiology and missiology must always flow from Trinitarian beginnings.

Jesus, of course, is very popular today.

We now have Jesus breath-mints, Jesus dog collars, Jesus band aids, and Jesus bobble heads. You can put Jesus on the bumper of your car or buy Jesus bubble bath. (If you don't believe me go visit a Christian bookstore; if for nothing else than for the potpourri!)

What have we done with Jesus?

We have . . .

- commercialized him
- consumerized him
- culturalized him
- secularized him
- domesticated him
- nationalized him
- and personalized him into what we want him to be.

We have recreated Jesus into the Savior we want him to be.

We have taken his words and made them fit our agendas. We have made him look like us, think like us, and speak like us. In short, we have fashioned Jesus into our image.

But not every Jesus is the REAL Jesus.

That is why the ultimate question of the Church for our time is: Who is Jesus? If we get the answer right, it changes everything. But if we get the answer wrong, it also changes everything. It is the central question of Mark's Gospel, asked by Jesus himself in the conversation at Caesarea Philippi: ***“But who do you say that I am?”*** (Mk 8:29).

You remember that the Gospel of Mark begins with a powerful, politically-loaded statement of purpose: ***“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*** (Mark 1:1)

This opening revelation sets up a dramatic irony that serves as the driving force of the story: we as readers know the identity of Jesus from the first line, but none of the characters in the story knows it – except, of course, the demons.

Only at the end of the story does a human character rightly express the confession of who Jesus is – and that from the outsider Gentile centurion, witnessing Jesus’ horrific death on the cross. He is the first to speak the truth: **“Truly this was God’s Son!”** (Mk 15:39).

Here we find the intended goal of Mark’s Gospel: **Jesus is finally and most completely revealed as the Son of God when he is known and shown as the Crucified One.**

Now if we were to stop in the middle of the Gospel a different ending might have been predicted. Jesus explodes on the scene announcing the kingdom of God and performing miracles with breathtaking speed:

- he casts out demons
- heals the sick
- raises the dead
- calms the sea and wind
- walks on water
- and multiplies bread to feed enormous crowds (not once, but twice in Mark – and significantly, the second feeding being in “Gentile” territory!)

He is, as it were, the divine superhero who demonstrates the power of God and is Lord over the powers and forces of evil. He is Daniel’s “Son of Man,” coming on the clouds with divine authority and power.

And so we can understand how the disciples could misinterpret the meaning of Jesus’ identity, until finally it’s made clear that the insiders have become outsiders. Their misunderstanding of Jesus’ purpose reaches epic proportions that finally comes to a head in Mark 8. It is the midpoint of Mark’s story. The first half of the Gospel began with announcing Isaiah’s “Way” (Mk 1:2); the second half opens “ON the Way” (Mk 8:27). On the way to the cross, but also on the way to discipleship.

Following the second feeding of the crowds is a very important story of the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida – but the healing is not **immediate**; it is completed in **stages**.

The first touch of Jesus to the blind man brings partial vision: he can see people (which is far better than he had ever been able to see before), but they look like trees walking around. It was only after a second touch from Jesus that the man’s sight was fully restored and he could see clearly. This “not seeing clearly” moment is strategically placed immediately before the Caesarea Philippi location, where a pantheon of gods were worshipped, and the Caesarea Philippi question: *“But who do you say that I am?”*

Mark’s point is well made. Up until this moment the disciples have seen Jesus, but only partially. He is “the walking around Savior” appearing as a tree. They can see – but they can’t really see. They need their vision completely healed.

And so, Jesus says: ***“But YOU – who do YOU say that I am?”***

“You are the Messiah! The CHRISTOS – the anointed one from God.”

The answer is technically correct – but philosophically wrong.

And here again is where Mark gives us a different perspective than Matthew. Although Peter is praised in Matthew for his insight . . . even to call it divine revelation . . . **in Mark he is rebuked**; and not gently, by the Jesus with the cocker-spaniel hairdo and soft hands. It is an intense reprimand! Jesus gets into Peter’s face; perhaps the strongest rebuke of a disciple from Jesus in the entire gospel record.

In fact, the verb “rebuked” is the same word used earlier in Mark when Jesus silences the demons after their pronouncement that he is the Son of God. And so, while Peter is not possessed, ironically, he unwittingly serves as Satan’s messenger at the precise moment when he has also received partial sight.

So, the Messianic secret, ***“Don’t tell anyone”*** turns out to be much more than waiting to be revealed at the appropriate time. Jesus is not rejecting the title – he is rejecting the MEANING. It is a strong statement of censure from Jesus, and the reason, it appears, is not to confuse people as to what kind of Messiah he will be. He will not be the nationalistic, militaristic Messiah of their expectations, oriented to the exercise of unchecked raw power.

But rather, with great love, ***“[Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”*** (Mk 8:31)

He **IS** Daniel’s “Son of Man,” coming on the clouds . . . but he is **ALSO** Isaiah’s suffering servant. As John says, he is the Lion and the Lamb.

So “Messiah” is redefined ... and given its meaning ... in terms of the suffering Son of Man.

How can this be?

Peter is understandably shaken, if not appalled:

“Take it back, Jesus. You start talking like that and we can forget about the revolution.”

“The people need a leader who can inspire them – and suffering and rejection and death doesn’t inspire.”

“I owe you big time. I was just a fisherman when you chose me. But I’m smart enough to know that we are never going to throw off the Roman oppression if you start down this path.”

“Call me ‘Satan’ if you want to – but you’re talking like a crazy man!”

But Jesus will not give in. In fact, Mark says Jesus turns up the heat, and says to the whole crowd: ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*** (Mk 8:34)

It is difficult for us to grasp how jarring this statement would have been to those who first heard it. The cross for a first century person was more than a metaphor. It was the very real and very public execution instrument of the state for slaves and revolutionaries. It would be the equivalent today of saying: Take up your electric chair or take up your gas chamber and follow me. It was a torturous, violent, humiliating way to die intended to discourage people from messing with the powers that be.

That’s why it’s not enough for us to say that our cross to bear is like a heavy burden that we might have to endure in life. **NO! A thousand times NO!**

- A difficult person might be a pain in the neck, but they are not our cross to bear.
- Facebook might be a thorn in our flesh, but it is not our cross to bear.
- Giving up chocolate or diet coke for Lent is not our cross to bear.
- Not even accreditation boards or IBOE curriculum reviews are our cross to bear! ☺

No, to deny ourselves and take up our cross is to follow Jesus.

It is knowingly and willingly laying down one’s life for the sake of others. It is embracing the redemptive self-giving way of Jesus that willingly suffers with them and for them and against the powers of evil and oppression that create it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *“When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”* This is not cheap grace – this is costly grace.

Apparently, it is not enough for us to understand Jesus as the crucified Messiah –now the identity of Jesus must become the identity of his disciples. And until that aspect of discipleship is made clear, our vision is still cloudy, and our spiritual healing is incomplete.

The Cross

It’s intriguing that after this conversation at Caesarea, the miracles in Mark are far less frequent. In fact, only three more remain in the entire Gospel. The focus now turns to the inexorability of the cross. Jesus the miracle-worker, who is Lord over nature, sickness, and demons now submits his power to become the suffering Son of Man. Mark will not let us escape the fact that those who perceive Jesus primarily as a purveyor of supernatural or political power have failed to understand him.

Peter’s answer is correct, but incomplete. And it is the same mistake the Church continues to make even today. We often answer correctly, but not rightly. We see, but we do not see. Jesus is walking around in his full glory, and yet we see a tree.

The question, ***“Who do you say that I am?”*** finds its final answer in the confession, ***“Truly this man was the Son of God”*** – a confession that can only be truly expressed at the foot of the cross.

And so now we understand that *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

And later, at his final meal with the disciples, Jesus distributes bread and wine with the revelatory words: *“This is my body,”* and *“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”* (Mk 14:22-24)

The gospel of Mark is a manifesto of radical discipleship. The Jesus of the gospel calls for a revolution, but not of what we think or want. The norm for our discipleship is defined by the cross. Jesus’ obedience as the Son of Man, interpreted as the suffering servant who lays down his life for others and for the sake of the kingdom of God, must now be our pattern for faithfulness. It is, as Ched Myers says, “a revolution of *means* as well as *ends*,” inviting us, yes, even instructing his beloved to reject “the deadly logic of domination.” The contradiction of the cross — a life that is given, not taken — is the only power that can heal the world. This will require that we see the Messiah as he really is — to refuse to settle for seeing trees walking around — and to willingly, joyfully, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

This, I believe, is the task of Christian theology: to help the whole Church see the real Jesus, in all of his “Son of Man” and “Suffering Servant” glory. Both combined! For this is the Jesus that, redeems and is redeeming, the whole world.

This is the Jesus that calls us out of a life centered in individualism and self-interest and into life according to redemptive love.

I had conversation with Verne Ward, our Global Mission Director, a few weeks ago. He had come from a training time with a group of Nazarenes who were wanting to go to neighboring countries where the church is not yet. Places where there are very few, if any, Christians – 99.9% from a majority religion. People who have not yet heard the story of Jesus. One year ago, 17 were sent out – eight families and one single person. And now they had come back to report on their work. To everyone’s surprise they had planted 31 new churches and testified that there were strong fellowships of believers and seekers.

It was hard to believe! How could that be? In some of the most difficult and heavily persecuted parts of the world? A question was asked of one of the men who had planted the churches: *“What is the risk for the people we are sending?”*

The man quickly responded, *“There is no risk.”*

People in the room looked at each other with puzzled looks on their faces. Another person asked the same question in another way: *“We know that Christians have lost their lives in these places. What is the inherent risk of sending these Nazarene families into this area to share the Gospel?”* The leader responded again: *“There is no risk. You know who we are! We have given everything to Jesus! We hold nothing back, we are completely his.”*

There may be cost, but we leave the cost to the Lord, because only the Lord knows the cost.

But there is nothing left to risk! You cannot risk what you have already given away. He owns it all. There is no risk."

I confess, I don't understand discipleship like that. I am learning from my brothers and sisters what it means to deny myself, and take up my cross, and to follow Jesus. But this much I know: The cross is not an optional form of discipleship. It is the WAY of discipleship. It is not the power steering/moon roof upgrade for a few special Christians. It is the call of us all. And this discipleship is volitional – it is not coincidental or incidental or accidental. We TAKE UP our cross.

I was flying home from South America just a few days ago. My seatmate asked me about my job. She had an interest in the Church of the Nazarene in Africa. I told her about a young college student named Harmon Schmelzenbach who felt a strong call to go to Africa; and how his college promised to provide support of \$200 a year. And how he went in obedience to the call. He met his wife Lula on the voyage over. Of how they finally landed in Swaziland where they labored for many years without a single convert. And how they buried three children there and despite warnings not to go into the mosquito infested valleys, Harmon continued to go and eventually died in his early 40's of malaria related diseases. But also of how God used them to lay a foundation of holiness evangelism in Africa, and how today, one hundred years later, there are over 700,000 Nazarenes in Africa.

She was amazed. She said: *"There is going to be a really big mansion in heaven for Christians who make those extraordinary kinds of sacrifice."* I had a moment of reflection. I answered: *"What if the Schmelzenbach's commitment to Christ and the gospel is actually the norm, and it's the rest of us who are the unusual ones?"*

She said: *"I'd like to believe that is true."*

Discipleship as the way of Jesus is not an option for the super-spiritual among us. It is the WAY.

There is a difference between GIVING UP and TAKING UP. One is resignation – the other is self-donation. It is significant, I think, that we are thinking about our Christology just a few days before holy week.

Mark's version of Good Friday says it this way: *"At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' (which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')"*

And then . . . *"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last."*

When Jesus was on the cross, he was not there as a victim. He chose to be there. He laid his life down. He took up the cross. And yet, Jesus did not do away with the darkness with a word of command or the wave of his hand in divine power. He could have; but he didn't. Do you know what he did instead? **He entered it!** He entered the darkness. He reached to the lowest depths where the most desolate of the world lies helpless. He entered the pain, the suffering, the loneliness, the despair, the FORSAKENESS of our lives.

And while I don't claim to understand everything there is to know about the mystery of this moment for Jesus, I think I believe this much . . . that because Jesus denied himself and took up his cross . . . at our most hurt, our most frightened, our most forsaken moments, we have a companion who HAS been there and WILL be there with us.

And nothing we THINK or DO in this state can shock him. If all we can do is cry out, he cried out first. He went to the darkest places we could ever go, and there he defeated the powers of sin and death . . . and God in Christ, entered into all the suffering that we could ever know:

- In that moment, he lay among the charred bodies of the babies burned alive in Auschwitz.
- He shared the numbed horror of their parents beyond consolation.
- He entered the pain of the atrocities of Bosnia and Rwanda.
- He entered the confusion of a crack addict lying in an alley.
- He entered the sickness of chemotherapy.
- He inhabited the loneliness of those wasting away in nursing homes.
- He wept with those aching with grief wondering if they can go on with the empty place in their heart.

Jesus took all our sin, and our brokenness, and plumbed the depths of darkness, because only then could he bring with him all he found there into the dawn of a new morning. He died the death of the most forsaken, so that even the most forsaken might share his resurrection.

Only Christianity tells us this truth: God suffers FOR us and WITH us. Why? Because Jesus is Lord! He is Lord of the light, and he is Lord of the night! He is Lord of the best of times, and he is Lord of the darkness. And because he has been there and back, and is NOW THE VICTOR, we are not and will not be forsaken.