

**February 28, 2021**

*Second Sunday in Lent*

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Mark 8: 27-35

***Who, then?***

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The church I served in Boston had a set of Tiffany windows depicting the four evangelists in the wall next to the pulpit – sort of looking over the preacher’s shoulder in a way I always found a little disconcerting. The artist had Mark exactly right: he’s a hooded figure, most of his young face submerged in the shadows of his clothing, his time, his role at the leading edge of the telling of the story. You can’t quite be sure who he is.

His lean and breathless gospel tells us almost nothing about its author, because Mark wants to keep the focus on Jesus – to keep us asking who Jesus is. That question echoes through Mark’s few chapters – and it launches the journey toward Jerusalem that begins on the road at Caesarea Philippi, on the lips of Jesus himself.

Perhaps Jesus asks the question as they’re walking. Maybe he asks it to pass the time on the way – or to fill a silence that has fallen over the group. Or maybe he asks it because he has questions of his own. Does he know that this question will follow him down the centuries, and loom larger as the world shrinks? *Who do people say that I am??*

You can almost see it stop them in their tracks – see them exchanging glances nervously around the group. *Do we tell him? Can we find a way not to tell him?* Finally someone answers. *They say you must be John the Baptist, come back from the dead.* Another voice ventures, *Some think that you must be the return of Elijah, harbinger of the Reign of God.* Then someone else: *People think you’re some kind of prophet.*

Jesus has no direct response to these reports. His asking has made it clear he’s aware that there are widely different ways of understanding him in circulation around them. But when the disciples confirm that, he doesn’t react – and that seems rich and complicated. Is Jesus intrigued by the multitude of lenses through which he’s being seen? Disappointed? Appalled? Flattered, or flummoxed? There’s no way to read the expression on his face: Mark leaves it in the shadows. But there are plenty of other places in Mark’s gospel where Jesus doesn’t hesitate to criticize his disciples for failing to understand who he is – so you can’t help noticing that he doesn’t speak any such words here, or give any indication that he’s surprised or upset to learn that some see him as the cutting edge of a contemporary movement, some as a throwback to an earlier era, some as a wise and eloquent teacher, some as a curiosity. That who people say he is depends, finally, on who they are, does not seem to faze or distress Jesus at all.

But the conversation isn’t over yet – and now Jesus sharpens the edge of the question: *who do you say that I am?* It’s Peter who answers this time, with yet another name to put in play – though Mark doesn’t tell us where he came up with the words he speaks. “You are Christ, the Messiah,” he says. You can almost feel the heft of the

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way that one lands among them – as though Peter’s saying it at last gives it the power to change how they all see him – even if only in the silence of their hearts, which is where Jesus tells them to keep this new name for now.

Names often matter a great deal in scripture. You may have noticed that, in the passage from Genesis 17 that Chris Dahl read earlier, there’s another instance of a name change. No one quite knows the etymology of the h’s that God added to the names of those wandering Aramean-octogenarians Abram and Sarai in the course of blessing them – but somehow, in the deep wisdom of the language, those letters reinforce the guarantee that the patriarch and matriarch, now Abraham and Sarah, would become ancestors of a multitude. History would know them, from then on, by names that would bear an extra mark of their intimacy with God: as though to say, *this is how we’ll know each other now, how we’ll remember all that has been given back, and the promise that lives between us now, engraved among the numberless stars for all of time to see* – the promise of a future, even though a future, of all things, was the thing that had seemed the most impossible for them to imagine.

When Peter spoke the name at last on the road, it changed the conversation. Christ – Messiah: the holy anointed one, the one chosen by God for the work of redeeming the people, rescuing the long-lost memory of indelible blessing, reviving the promise of abundant life written still in the silent numberless stars but forgotten among people who serve only their own appetites, who guard only their own interests. This name, Christ, as Peter spoke it, was a sign of how they’d know each other from then on: *our name for the mark you’ve left on us, our special way of remembering what we felt we’d been given back when we were with you.*

But it turned out – right there “on the way,” maybe in the middle of the road – that they had a lot to learn about the meaning of this new name they were getting used to – what it meant, and what it would ask of them. Mark says that “he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,” be rejected by everyone, be killed even, and then rise again, undefeated. Mark (of all people) said that Jesus was quite clear about this: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” And it turned out that, by holding the name they’d found for him among them and inside them, it would change what they’d come to be called, too, echoing down the ages all the way to here. It would change their name too – and ours: Christians. Other Christs. Followers on the way.

It was his hardest teaching. Then, and now. Did he ever say anything to us that has been harder to hear than, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”? Abraham and Sarah only had to find a way to believe that God could keep a promise of a multitude of descendants; Peter and his companions had to imagine that Jesus’s decision to walk directly toward the cross and allow the powers of the world to have their way with him was exactly what would clinch his triumph over those powers, exactly what would reveal God’s love to be unstoppable. It was all too much for Peter; *never!* he said to the one to whom he was newly close enough to call Messiah. *Never that – you are the Christ!* Ah, but it would become, for Peter, painfully clear (though there would be still more painful forms of clarity to come before the end of the story) that what the name “Messiah” really means is deeper, wider, stronger, weaker, riskier, more precious than he or any of the others on the way had yet begun to grasp.

“Satan,” Jesus called him in turn, raising the stakes of the name game yet again – “Satan,” he called one of the best friends he ever had on this earth, evidently still fresh in the memory of his Lenten temptation in the wilderness at the hands of the real Satan, the real Adversary. “Get behind me,” or, *get out of my way*, for my way is the way, the truth, the life, and we are on that way right now – on the way to the most fearful place. It is necessary that we be on that way, Jesus explained, so that death not be allowed to wield its customary fear, not be allowed to shrink and shrivel human life. The threat of death in any of its forms – soul-death, body-death, community-death – is what keeps the powers in power; ask anyone camped on the other side of the southern border of the United States. Ask anyone whose poverty or whose skin color or gender makes fear their daily

bread. So the only way to defeat the powers is to resist the fear and to practice love in any of its forms – truth-telling, justice-making, life-giving, wound-healing – even in the face of death. So it is, indeed, necessary that Jesus and those who follow make their way directly toward it. There is no deeper, darker, colder fear. Only perfect love can cast it out. So follow me, he says. *Who do you say that I am?*

Mark is looking over our shoulders – though we can’t quite make out his face, or know what storms he drew his hood up against. But we have our own storms. Mark only wants to meet us on the way and leave us listening to Jesus – who didn’t seem to care much what others called him, who seemed focused only on the road toward love’s confrontation with anything, anything that stands in its way. “Let anyone who wishes to follow me take up a cross,” he said – not a polemic or a jihad or even a crusade. Let any who wish to follow on this way come, he says.

When you think about it, it shouldn’t surprise us that, as we pick up and carry with him the cross-shaped call to *turn*, to repent, and wield our confidence that the Reign of God is so very near, we’ll find ourselves on the way, as he did, to places where the message of transformative love is threatening – to places where our insistence on justice makes people angry – to places where the integrity we’re trying to practice provokes the people who don’t know what integrity is to lash out. We’ll see the cross and remember what we’ve been given back, and walk without fear toward the fearful. We will walk without rancor toward the hateful. We will walk toward the powers of this world with only the power of the certainty of God’s indelible blessing upon each life. That’s where the way leads.

And this name of his is how we’ll know each other now, this name he told us to hold and to keep until it started changing our own names. Christian. This is how we’ll remember the promise that’s been given back to us and lives among us now, the promise engraved among the numberless stars for all of time to see: the promise of a future beyond fear and death, even though a future was the thing that had once seemed the most impossible to imagine.

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