

Matthew 16:13-30

The first Jesus Seminar took place in the district of Caesarea Philippi, the ancient Roman city located at the southwestern base of Mt. Hermon, on the northernmost border of Israel in what is known today as the Golan Heights. The city was once known as “Paneas,” after the Greek god Pan and renamed after being given to Herod the Great by Emperor Augustus Caesar. Herod’s son, Philip, had rebuilt the city and named it for Tiberius, and the place became known as the “Caesar City of Philip.” In those days it was a rest and recreation center for the Roman army and the population was mostly Gentile.

Our Gospel passage today is loaded with drama. Jesus stands in an area littered with the temples of Syrian gods, in a place where the ancient Greeks gods looked down, in a place where the white marble splendor of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape, and a place where the history of Israel loomed.

The very breath of ancient religion was in the atmosphere. The area was scattered with temples of the ancient Syrian Baal worship; there were no fewer than 14 Baal temples in the neighborhood. Near Caesarea Philippi there was a great hill in which there was a deep cavern; and that cavern was said to be the birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature. The cave was also said to be the birthplace of the Jordan River. The ancient faith of Judaism would be in the air for anyone who was a devout Jew.

There was also a great temple of white marble, built to honor the godhead of Caesar by Herod the Great. So here, where the Holy Land borders the rest of the world, where the sacred butts up against the secular, a new religion is born.

Here a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter gathered twelve very ordinary men around him. At this very moment the orthodox religious authorities in Jerusalem are plotting against him and planning to destroy him as a dangerous heretic and threat. And here, of all places, this amazing carpenter stands and asks the disciples who they believe him to be.

Jesus asks his followers a question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And then the question that people ever since have had to face in dealing with Jesus, “But who do you say that I am?”

At first the disciples, and the general public, believing in reincarnation, get the answer wrong: “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of

the prophets.” But then Peter, the rough-hewn, un-theological fisherman speaks up and declares something far different: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Everything changes now. No longer just a prophet or Jewish sage, or an itinerant faith healer and exorcist, or “man of the spirit,” or revolutionary dedicated to overturning the Pax Romana and the conservative temple hierarchy in sympathy with Rome.

Peter will go on to completely misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. He will later resist Jesus’ intention to turn himself over to the authorities, and he will eventually deny and desert his Lord. But for now, in this moment, he confesses Jesus to be the “Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

So here it is, Jesus’ question for the ages, “Who do **you** say that I am?”

I don’t think Jesus asks this question for his sake, but for ours. And I don’t think Jesus is looking for a detailed explanation of our well-crafted credal formulas or a learned lecture on Christological theories. It’s clear from the Gospels that Jesus is looking for how we answer this monumental question with our lives.

So, how do we become enlightened as to Jesus’ true identity? Peter didn’t figure it out on his own. It occurred to him after living with Jesus and sharing deeply in his life and work, and by revelation, God opening his heart and mind through the inner testimony of the Spirit (H.K. Oehmig).

The fact that it’s Peter whom God chooses to reveal Jesus’ identity gives me great encouragement and hope. Even though Peter completely misunderstood the meaning of the revelation, as we will see in next week’s continuation of this passage, God kept working with him. Christ, accepted and embraced, never leaves anyone the same. This was certainly true of Peter and this can be true for us as well.

Peter’s revelation came from God. Revelation, it turns out, only comes from God. The same is true for faith. The faith we seek, and the confidence and courage we long for during this pandemic time of political, social and economic unrest, are gifts from God. The good news is that God is still working among us.

In his response to Peter’s confession of faith, Jesus promised to build his church, “and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” God is still at work in and among us. You can see this in the Hospitality Village, the Home Starter Kits, the

willingness of parishioners to forego in-person worship that normally sustains us, and the tolerance for zoom-only gatherings.

The God who created the universe from nothing, the planet earth and us from stardust, and life from death, is still at work sustaining us in faith, creating in us hope, stirring us to loving acts of compassion and mercy.

Thanks be to God!

Resources: William Barclay, 1975; Synthesis, 2014; David Lose, 2017, 2020.