

September 21st: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Welcome, my friends, to “What Would Jesus Say?” our series on Jesus and his complicated questions and answers. In these next ten weeks, we’ll be taking a closer look at ten conversations that Jesus had with the people of his time, and hopefully, this will give us some wisdom about how to live out these truths in our own modern era. Pastor Heather gave us an incredible introduction last week, so if you missed that, be sure to check out the manuscript of her sermon posted on our website—that would be a great way to start this process if you’re unfamiliar with Jesus, or just want to learn more about how we’ve set up this series.

Before we meditate together on the first question that Jesus addresses, let’s take a moment to prepare our hearts and minds by praying together.

God of Truth, we come to this holy space with questions that we cannot seem to answer. We come with anxieties that cause our minds to spiral. We come with uncertainties that fill our souls with fear. We come with worries that keep us awake at night. In these sacred moments, you meet us here, and you welcome us into the comfort of your divine embrace. While we are in your arms this morning, remind us that asking questions is a faithful response. Reassure us that voicing these doubts and desires is a way for us to grow closer to you. Invite us to look deeper and be more curious, so that we can start this new week with your wisdom ringing in our ears. Amen.

A few months ago, I was working from home on a Monday morning when I heard a knock at my door. To begin with, this was unusual, because I live alone, and on the top floor of an apartment building, so there’s not a lot of foot traffic on a regular basis. To make matters worse, I was still in my pajamas, my hair was pulled up in a giant messy bun, and I was definitely in need of a shower. I just hadn’t gotten there yet. I had sat down to eat my breakfast and answer a few emails, and then suddenly it was 11am and a strange man was outside my door. I quickly looked out the peephole and surmised that I wasn’t in any immediate danger, so I unlocked the door and cautiously opened it. The man

immediately launched into a monologue about something to do with an inspection, and after about three minutes he paused and said, “So, can I come in?”

He must have noticed my confused facial expression, because he took a step back just as I replied, “Um, I’m sorry, who are you? What exactly are you doing here?” I didn’t mean to be rude, but he hadn’t actually introduced himself, so it was very unclear what he was doing at my door. When the man realized that he hadn’t given his name, occupation, or even his relationship to my apartment building, he backtracked and confirmed that he was with my property management company. Unfortunately, that didn’t really help, because my property management company has had a lot of turnover recently, and I had no idea which people were even in charge anymore. When I told him this, and how I hadn’t received any information about an inspection, he pulled out his phone, looked at his email, and then flushed bright red before apologizing—he was supposed to be knocking on door number 8, not door number 9. It was my neighbor he was trying to reach, not me.

I had forgotten all about this silly encounter until recently, when I started to think about this series and in particular, the passage that we are going to talk about today. This case of mistaken identity, and my question of “who are you?” seemed like they might have some parallels to a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew—a conversation that gets at some deeper questions about Jesus’ true purpose. Because that’s something that we see over and over again in these biblical writings, there are often questions underneath questions—there are multiple layers to the inquiries in our text. We’ll come back to that idea in just a few minutes, but first, let’s take a closer look at the first layer of this passage.

Jesus and his disciples had traveled together to Caesarea Philippi, which was a city built at the foot of Mount Herman, located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This was far away from the Jewish ritual sites of Jerusalem, or the wealthy towns of Judea—this area was farm country, rich in natural springs and streams that flowed into acres of fertile soil. Due to this reputation for

producing abundant harvests, this city was also the home of fertility cults and temples dedicated to related Greek and Roman gods.

It is here that Jesus begins a conversation with his closest friends—a conversation about identity. We’ve already heard it read for us this morning, but here’s a different way of approaching this scene—we’re going to watch a short clip from the TV show *The Chosen* that depicts this moment. So let’s watch together.

The Chosen clip

You might have noticed that before Jesus gets to his big question, he asks a smaller one first, almost like a verbal warm up for his disciples. In front of these temples dedicated to other gods, he questions them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

I love that we get to see some different body language in this dramatization—the confused faces, the glancing away, the disciple taking notes at the back. It reminds me of a middle school classroom when the teacher has asked a question that none of the students really know how to respond. We’ve all been there, right? Maybe as a student, or maybe as the teacher, we know what it’s like to sit in that uncomfortable silence, waiting for someone to have the right answer. After a few moments, some of the disciples do chime in—they reply, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

To be fair to these new followers of Jesus, these are all good answers. It’s clear that all of these men attended Sunday School at least once or twice, because they wisely brought up the prophets—spiritual leaders who spoke to God’s people and gave instruction about how to live in alignment with God’s values. In total, the expression “Son of Man” is used 107 times in the Hebrew scriptures, and 93 out of those uses are found in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel.

Additionally, if you were a faithful Jew in this time period, you had probably heard passages from the Book of Daniel, which is now found in what we call the Old Testament. This text was written in the 2nd century BCE as apocalyptic writing—it tells the story of a Jewish exile in Babylon, who experiences divine visions and shares prophecies about the end times. In chapter 7, the author describes a particular vision in which God gives ultimately authority over the earth to “one like a son of man.” This chosen person saves God’s people from their current oppression and enemies—and therefore, in Jesus’ time, this messianic title was applied to leaders like John the Baptist, who spoke out against the power of empire.

However, Jesus has something else in mind, well, someone else. Did you catch the shift that Jesus makes in his language? Instead of talking about the Son of Man in the abstract, he then poses this direct question to his disciples: “who do you say that I am?”

It seems like a simple question, but it’s really not. And here’s where we come back to this idea of layered questions, because what’s underneath this particular inquiry is a larger theological truth. The bigger question is this: who, exactly, is Jesus? Who is he?? What’s his purpose here on earth? What is he doing here?

Those of us that have been Christians a long time might not realize that this is a real question for people who are not familiar with Jesus. If we’ve grown up in church, we get used to hearing about Jesus and believing certain things about him, but for people who have never encountered him before, some of this religious language feels like a random man has shown up on their porch to knock on their door. For people who don’t know Jesus, they might be scratching their heads and wondering, “Um, I’m sorry, who are you??”

And this is occasionally what happens as Jesus and his followers travel around their homeland. They meet all kinds of people who don’t have a clue who he is—and to some, he’s just a random homeless rabbi. To some, he’s a raving lunatic. They meet all kinds of people who need to know what he’s all about

before they're willing to let him in. So to ensure that there's no confusion, or sense of mistaken identity, Jesus wants to make sure that his closest companions know the truth.

A couple of them in particular seem to catch on to what Jesus is asking—including a man named Peter, one of Jesus' best friends. Peter is like that kid in the classroom whose hand always shoots up first, he's gotta be the first one to respond when he knows the answer. We all remember that one kid—the one who waves their arm around, trying to get the teacher's attention. That's Peter.

As we saw in the clip, Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In this moment, Jesus is a proud teacher, because Peter has made the important connection—Jesus is the Son of Man, the one who comes in God's name to save God's people. Jesus is the prophesied Messiah, the one sent to set the oppressed free. And because Peter is the first one to speak this truth aloud, the first one to recognize Jesus for who he truly is, he is given a great honor. Jesus says, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

So it sounds like knowing the truth about who Jesus is and what his purpose is forms the foundation of our mission as the church—this is the information that guides all of our discipleship, right?

Then why does this passage end with this curious statement: "Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." Why would Jesus do this, immediately after asking all of these questions about his identity? Why would he reveal himself to be the Son of Man and the Messiah, if he didn't want other people to know?

We don't get a good explanation for this in the text itself, Jesus doesn't explain himself further, but here's what I think is part of Jesus' reasoning for saying this. As part of Jesus' affirmation of Peter, he says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father

in heaven.” Meaning, Peter didn’t know who Jesus was because he had been told by other humans, but because he had received this truth from God. He hadn’t been told what to believe, he figured it out through a personal experience of divine revelation. It became real to him in a tangible way that was private yet transformative.

And I think that’s what Jesus wants for all of us—he wants us to know the truth about him through personal experience. He initiated this moment of connection with his disciples, hoping that they would discover the truth about his identity through their relationship, and I think the same can be true for us when we come to him seeking a relationship of our own. Instead of relying on what some dogma says, or what your faith tradition tells you to believe, it seems like Jesus wants us to come to know him through a direct encounter. And because of that encounter, Jesus wants you to make up your own mind about him, not simply follow him because it’s what you think you should do.

My friends, it’s one thing for us to read this passage and listen to what our spiritual ancestors have to say about Jesus—but it’s another thing entirely to turn around and apply these ancient questions to ourselves. So this week, here’s how you can do that. Set aside a few minutes when you have space to relax, and reread this passage—or rewatch this scene from *The Chosen*. And as you reread or rewatch, I invite you to put yourself in the shoes of the disciples, imagine that you are one of the people gathered for this important conversation. If Jesus asked you, “who do you say that I am?” do you know what you would say? Who exactly is Jesus to you? And do you believe this because you’ve been told to believe it, or because you’ve experienced this truth for yourself? Would you recognize Jesus if he showed up at your door?

Here’s the truth: only you know who Jesus is for you—and only you can decide if he’s the Messiah that he says he is. Only through a personal, transformative experience can you come to know this for yourself.

If you’ve never encountered Jesus before or you’ve never really thought about Jesus in this way, it’s totally okay if you don’t have all the answers right

now—and you don't need to force yourself to make a decision before you're ready. You can ponder and discern and question as long as you'd like, because the journey of faith is a lifelong process. It's okay if you're starting from a different place than someone else. It's okay if you're asking different questions.

But I do want to encourage you to think about them this week, because as we've seen with Peter, knowing this truth about Jesus can change our lives. It can take us from curious students to transformed disciples—it can move us from being a follower of this movement to a leader of God's people. When we know the truth about Jesus because we've experienced his presence for ourselves, our lives have a new rock, a new foundation. And with this new foundation, God might build something new and powerful in us and through us. When we can see the larger picture of God's liberating and intimate love, we can be part of sharing that love with our broken and hurting world.

And it all starts with this question: Who do you say that I am?

Amen.