

This Sunday's texts:
Malachi 4:1-6
1 John 4:15-21
Matthew 16:13-17

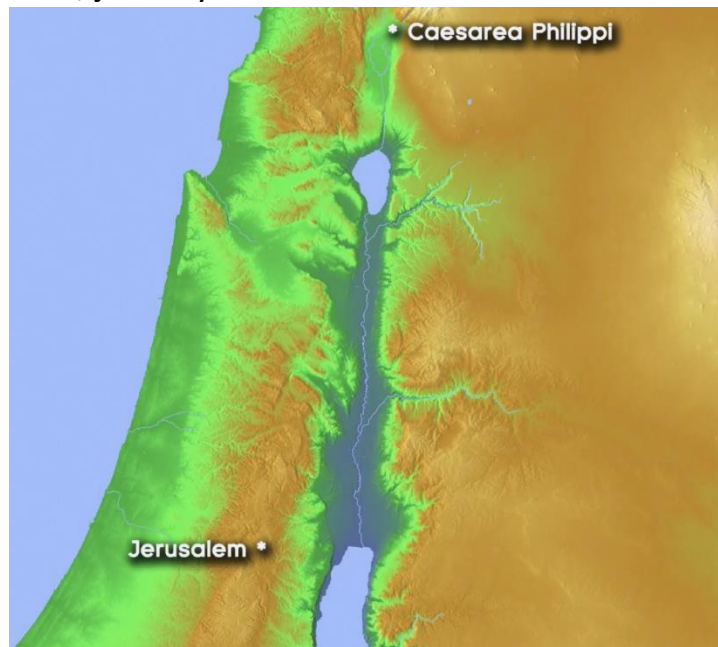
Who do You Say Jesus Is?
Pastor Jim Cords
February 5, 2023

The holy Gospel, according to Matthew, the 16th chapter:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord God, help us to see Jesus. Help us to recognize who You are and to share, to proclaim what we believe. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The identity of Jesus. Certainly a critical factor in the Gospel. Matthew wants us to know who Jesus is. But there is a difference between who Jesus is and who people or even we say He is and, therefore, the proclamation of the Gospel, the telling, the word sharing who Jesus is becomes critically important, so that we might believe and share. Jesus, in this text, journeys to what we believe is the furthest place from Jerusalem that he travels in His lifetime. A place called Caesarea Philippi. On the map, you see Jerusalem. At the bottom, you see the Dead Sea. You may or may not be able to make out the River Jordan. It goes up to the Sea of Galilee. At the very top, well above the Sea of Galilee, is Caesarea Philippi. I've been there.





I've seen images like this one. On the walls, on the side of the hill, there are now remnants of temples to various religions, various gods. This was a place where a variety of gods were worshiped, including the one known as Pan. This is the half-deer, half-human god and it's believed that the headwaters of the River Jordan were a place

where the path would go down to Hell and Pan was guarding that path to Hades. This is where Jesus comes with his disciples. This is where Jesus asks the question "Who do people say that I am?"¹ in this place of a plurality of beliefs.

Well, who do people in *our* world say that Jesus is? We too live in a place of pluralities, of beliefs. It's maybe good for us to reflect on this question that Jesus asked His disciples. As we are out and about, as we are hanging out with people of this larger community of Silicon Valley, who do people say Jesus is? Perhaps that's a question we might even want to ask if it's not offered. We might especially ask that of people who are of different faith persuasions than ourselves. What do you think? What have you heard? What do you say when I ask this question? Who do you think Jesus is? It might be interesting to hear some answers and it might open up an opportunity and even bring up the question "What about you?" What do you say?

I found this on the internet. Writer, Carolyn Chen says in MarketWatch, "Silicon Valley is famously non-religious, showing one of the lowest rates of religious affiliation in the United States."² and then she says this, "But in my study of work and spirituality in the Silicon Valley, I have found that tech workers do worship - at work." The suggestion is that we, in Silicon Valley, believe that the answers to life's greatest needs will be found in our technological advancement, that as we do our jobs better here in Silicon Valley, the needs of the world will be met; we will be blessed. Our lives and the lives of the world will be improved. To whom do we turn? In what do we put our trust?

¹ Matthew 16:15

² Chen, C. (2022, March 8). Opinion: Tech companies are more like church than you think. MarketWatch. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/tech-companies-are-more-like-church-than-you-think-11646764701>

I don't want to suggest to any of you who have invested your lives in technological innovation or maybe still are, that what you do may not, in fact, bring improvement to patterns of life, may not be a blessing to others. I just simply want to suggest it isn't the *ultimate* blessing. It isn't addressing the *ultimate* need of God's creation, rather that is God Himself. But it may, in fact, play a part in who people see Jesus to be. Not necessarily *the* Savior of the world, not necessarily *the* Lord whom we're called to follow and serve.

We live in a very pluralistic society. I made this bigger, hoping that maybe you could read it. Maybe you cannot, but it's interesting.

2010 Santa Clara County's Ten Largest Faith Groups		
Religious Group	Number of adherents	% of total population
Roman Catholic	447,369	25.11
Nondenominational	76,984	4.32
Hindu, Traditional Temples	31,340	1.76
Mormon	24,739	1.39
Buddhism, Mahayana	19,243	1.08
Muslim	18,851	1.06
United Methodist	16,731	0.94
Southern Baptist	16,587	0.93
Assemblies of God	15,643	0.88
Hindu, Indian-American Hindu	10,096	0.57

This is a list. It's all the way back from 2010 and it suggests that Santa Clara County's 10 largest faith groups are listed here. One of the interesting elements, for those of you who can't see it, maybe the front rows can answer. Where is Lutheran on this list? Yeah, not in the top ten. It is interesting though that 32.18% of the top ten are made up of various Christian denominations, but it also suggests that we are surrounded by Hindus, Mormons, Buddhists, Muslims and there are probably many others. Again, this is simply a suggestion that we understand that there are many among us who have no stated religious affiliation at all and there is a plurality of thought. Maybe it would be valuable to ask "Who do you say that Jesus is?" And maybe it would be very valuable to know how you will answer the question "Who do you say that Jesus is?" as we bear witness to the Gospel.

It's interesting that they say, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."³ It's also interesting to know that in our text today, there's a forerunner to the Messiah coming. There's a forerunner that's announced, that's coming before the Son of Man.

And some people are suggesting that Jesus is only the forerunner, that He's preparing the way for the actual Messiah to come. I've heard many people of other religions say Jesus is a good teacher. Jesus teaches love of others and love of God and that's a *good* thing. As they make those statements, they believe that they're honoring our beliefs. From their faith perspective, as they say to us that Jesus is a good teacher, it doesn't mean they want to learn from Him. It just means that you're okay.

But I also want to suggest that sometimes we say Jesus is a good teacher. Sometimes our faith finds expression in learning about God from Jesus. I want to suggest to you that there's more to it than learning "about," that Jesus comes as the Anointed One. He comes as the One to whom our lives are due all allegiance. That's more than simply learning "about."

Again, this is what Malachi says, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."⁴ Did you hear those words? Those are really interesting words: "great and dreadful." How many of you considered dreadful to be great? I have heard people say great dread, to suggest even worse dreadfulness. What I want to suggest is that this does communicate hope and despair. It does communicate true greatness and also dreadfulness because the judgment of God comes. A part of what we recognize in Jesus is that the Savior of the world has come so that that dreadful day can be made great, as we experience Our Savior coming as Lord and King and Judge and not simply the One before whom we are guilty and our lives fall short.

Joe and I just got back from spending last week in retreat. Joe's retreat was in San Antonio. I love San Antonio, but I don't know that I would consider it to be an oasis. I got back from carefree Arizona, a place just north of Phoenix and while the desert has its own beauty, I don't know that I would call it an oasis either. It's also believed that as Jesus journeys up to Caesarea Philippi, He's not just standing before this plurality of religions as He walks by with His disciples and ask these questions, but He's going to a place where they might abide together, where, in fact, the disciples are being discipled. They're being put in a place where the truth of who Jesus is, in fact, is revealed to them in this quiet place of beauty. I want to

³ Matthew 16:14

⁴ Malachi 4:5

suggest that when Jesus asks the question, “But who do you say that I am?” He launches one of the most significant and important parts of the Gospel of Matthew. This incredible confession of Peter “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”⁵ You are the Christ. You are the Anointed One. You are, in fact, the One who fulfills the very promise of God, to redeem and save his people and indeed, to redeem and save the world. He saw and he proclaimed this incredible statement of faith that, indeed, can be our own. You are the One sent by God.

It’s a beautiful moment and most of the commentaries I read put the center point down on Peter and it becomes this beautiful thing. And Jesus announces and you are Peter, the “rock upon whom I will build My Church.”⁶

There's debate. Is He going to build the church on Peter or is He going to build the church on the confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God?

If you keep reading, there becomes a problem. Peter says “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Isn't that great? Then Jesus begins to proclaim who this Messiah is. This Messiah is the One who came ... to die. The authority, the greatness, the magnificence of who Jesus is sent into the world to be a sacrifice, so that we could see the depth and magnitude of God's love for us. When Jesus begins to reveal, even to Peter, who's just proclaimed who He is, what the true path of the Messiah will be, Peter decides, knowing that he's a follower of the Messiah, that his job is to defend Jesus. Jesus, who has called him the rock, now says you are a stumbling block. When He says “Get thee behind me, Satan!” instead of the rock being the foundation upon which the church will be built, this defensiveness now becomes a scandal upon which people will trip and fall.

I hate to admit this. As I was driving here this morning and my sermon was all done, it was all locked up and put away in nicely tucked in, I sense that God was saying to me. Maybe, Jim, you should talk to the church about our tendency to have a desire to defend Jesus to the masses, to be prepared when they tell you who *they* think Jesus is, that you will stand guard, that you will protect Jesus' identity by arguing and challenging and being willing to fight for your God, instead of remembering that who Jesus is as the Messiah was One who came to die, One who came to demonstrate the love of God through sacrifice, so that we who are sinners, while we are yet sinners, would know His love, that instead of defending

⁵ Matthew 16:16

⁶ Matthew 16:18

Him in our own minds or in our conversations, we will simply proclaim the goodness of who He is.

The *Small Catechism* says in the Second Article, “In order that [we] might be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”⁷ “Who do you say that I am?” You, Jesus, are the One who gave His life, so that I could be forgiven. You, Jesus, are the One who gave His life, so that I could be called a child of God. You are Jesus, whom God sent to the world because He loves the people of the world. You are Jesus, my Savior and Lord. Who do you say that Jesus is? The One you recognize as the only One who could do for you what you could not do for yourself, forgive you, love you, and establish your identity. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are the sons and daughters of the Living God, declared in baptism, made true through the promise of God and the sacrifice of Jesus for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁷ Luther, Martin. *Small Catechism*. The Creed, The Second Article: Redemption