

**Rev. Bob Jensen**  
**“Who Is This Man?”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, June 13, 2021**

***Exodus 33:7-16***

*Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.*

*Moses said to the LORD, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.” Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.’ He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’*

***Mark 8:27-30***

*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?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

Let us pray. Open my lips oh, God, that I may proclaim Your praise. And in the scripture, He's been heard and proclaimed this day, use us to know the wonders of Your grace, to find renewed commitment to You and to Your world in Christ we pray. Amen.

A reading this day is a very short one that comes from the gospel of Mark, the eighth chapter, and I want to just share with You, it may be a short little passage, but it stands as a huge passage in the midst of Mark's telling of the story of Jesus. It stands as kind of a linchpin, a centerpiece for up to now in the story we hear all about Jesus, this wonder-working one who performs miracles, who heals, who teaches along the way. And there's a buzz about him. And after this reading, everything turns then and points toward Jerusalem and ultimately toward his crucifixion and his resurrection. So, this passage stands at the center. It is one that helps to answer the question of the buzz all around us, who is this man?

Listen now for God's word, the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, beginning at the twenty seventh verse. 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?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist and others, Elijah and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them. But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, "You are the messiah," and he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It sounds kind of like a standard question of ours, doesn't it? This question of Jesus, what are people saying about me? He wants to know. And we often ask that same question ourselves, don't we? What are they saying about me? I wonder who's talking about me and what are they saying? We want to know, and we hear from others what is being said, often by impression, if not by word, and with a careful [inaudible], but with ears perked up with great intensity, we sometimes ask that question ourselves. Even if we never speak the words, we all live with the question, "What are people saying about me? What's my reputation?" And we watch anxiously. Four signals from the people around us, and we hope that those signals bring us signs that are positive and affirming and reinforcing. But Jesus, of course, didn't ask the question quite that way. His concern was not for Himself after all, as ours often is, but rather for others. And it was a good question because Jesus had already made lots of waves in the society of which he had been a part. Rumors were flying gossip followed. He and the disciples followed on his heels every day. In the section of Mark's Gospel alone, Jesus had just finished feeding a crowd of 4000 people. It had an argument with some Pharisees right out in the open, right in the public square. And at that [inaudible], he had healed a man of his blindness along the way. Each of these events newsworthy of the day. So floating around the community was this thought bubble, this question. And over and over, hanging in the air was this question, "Who is this guy? Who is this man?" It's a deceptively hard question, is it not? For we know that Jesus is mystery, after all. We don't fully understand it ourselves. Our proclamations about Jesus always falls short because we struggle with this idea of how can any living creature be both human and divine? How can a man made of flesh and blood pinch him, and he'll scream, cut him, and he'll bleed, tell him a joke, and he'll laugh? How can this fully human being also be the very son of God? It's a difficult question. It's hard for us to comprehend and hold these truths in tension. And it's been a major preoccupation of the Christian church for 20 centuries now. Robert Healy, who was my church history professor at [inaudible] Seminary, once said that, "Every creed, every statement of faith ever written from the Apostles Creed to the Nicene Creed on down, they all stem from some kind of controversy in the life of the church."

So the church trying to answer questions about itself in the midst of arguments in the body. And most of those arguments had to do with this very same question, "Who is this man? How do we describe him for ourselves and for others so that everyone might know him in the fullness of his life?" Perhaps we should take a warning in that, that every time we think we have the answer to this question, we should be careful. It's an innocent-looking short little question, but it's one that's full of hidden explosiveness. Who do people say that I am? Well, that's kind of an easy question, at least it was for the disciples. And they started rattling it off, all of the things they'd heard around the street corners and in the marketplaces of the towns in the Galilee. It's a relatively easy answer for them. And it's not all that difficult for us either. Who do people say that I am? But what have you heard lately? The disciples heard things like, "Well, some people say you're John, and others say you're Alija or another one of the prophets." And we have the same testimony. From the early church, we can go to the writings of Clement or Augustine or [inaudible] or [inaudible] from the Middle Ages. From the Reformation and beyond, there's John Calvin and Martin Luther and John Wesley, just to name a few. In more modern times, we have the teachings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C.S. Lewis, and Martin Luther King. Even today, there is Juergen Moltmann, Walter Brueggemann. And the list goes on and on.

What are people saying about me? All you have to do is open a book, go online to Google, and you'll find what people have been saying about Jesus through the ages. And if you're not into classical theologians where you can get the answer another way. Just turn on your television and flip the dial. We don't have dials anymore. Hit your remote, right? You find them all

over TV, day and night. If you don't like what one person has to say about Jesus, you flip the remote and hit the button a couple of times you come to another station, you get someone else. And every one of them, each one of them, will tell you that they can answer that question with absolute certainty at least for themselves. Who do people say that I am? It's a great discussion starter but it's a question that ends very abruptly with the second question of Jesus. Who do you say that I am? Obviously, he was seeking more than a name. What he was looking for were the labels, the titles that people were using. And some of the titles of the day that the disciples were hearing were not always so easy to report back to Jesus because many of them were not so very complimentary. Blasphemer was one of those titles. Fraud was another and perhaps as dangerous to anyone, to those in positions of power in the establishment titles like nontraditional, a radical. You have to remember that Jesus had not observed the Sabbath the way it was supposed to be observed. He'd not done his fasting as was required by the law. He had consorted with lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and all kinds of people that were to be shunned and ignored and even had the audacity to claim the ability to forgive sins. But then out of nowhere comes this answer of Peter. Excuse me. Peter said, "You're the Christ. You're the messiah." "Who do you say that I am?" "I say you are the Messiah, the Christ." And that's a new title. It came right up out of Peter's hearts and tripped over his tongue and his lips, and it was inspired in the sense that he hadn't thought it through, which was very typical for Peter as the Gospels report. It's also in the sense that he didn't understand fully what he had said, he didn't know what it meant, what it was all about. But still, Peter was right. You are the Christ, the Messiah. It was an act of faith, a response of faith, even if he didn't fully understand the implications of what he was saying. Friends, even Peter's answer cannot be your answer or my answer.

The personal focus of the question on you puts us on the spot because ultimately, what other people say about Jesus is not what matters, it's what each one of us says about this man. Who do you say that I am? Here, Jesus seeks a response from us that is intensely personal and profoundly honest. And that response is shaped more by our lives, by our values, by our commitments, by our priorities, by our actions, and by our inactions than it is by our words. Now, some of the labels we will have for Jesus are strong and positive: friend, guide, teacher, master, savior. But I would suggest to you that some of the other labels and titles that we might assign are not nearly so acceptable, even though sometimes they might be more honest. Casual friend is one. That is one we are willing to deal with when we have the time. Annoying advocate is another. Always wanting, demanding something more from me. Poetic dreamer, unrelated and out of touch with our real worlds of politics and business here in the 21st century. And then an old charge, disturber of the peace. Making us uneasy in our comfort and challenging us always to stir ourselves on behalf of the needs of the whole world and proclaimed this gospel we have in earthen vessels. And we keep changing our titles for Jesus, I suspect, at least in part, depending upon our circumstances or maybe even the mood of the day. But somewhere inside us, somewhere down deep inside us is a basic title or a set of titles that describe most clearly, most nearly for us what our fundamental relationship is with this Christ. And that's what we're talking about here today. It's what Jesus was asking from his disciples and it's what Jesus is asking from you and from me. What he's demanding from each of us as he asks us the question.

And so, I invite you today to pretend with me for a moment that Jesus is right here in this sanctuary. That he's standing right here in this pulpit right next to me or that he's standing right there behind the table presiding over the sacrament. Or that he's sitting right next to you on one side or the other. And he looks you square in the eye, and he says, "Who do you say that I am?" His first concern is not what you would tell me as a preacher or what you would tell your pastor, nor is he concerned that you would respond with the Orthodox answers you learned in Sunday school or with what you would say to each other being polite. Rather, his first, his last, and his only concern is what you will say to yourself and to him. For in his presence, we cannot lie or deceive or simply be polite or correct. Rather, we have to play it straight and live with the results of the often mixed labels that are likely to come out of us. But of course, we don't have to pretend that Jesus is here with us today, do we? For by the testimony of the holy scriptures and by the presence of the Spirit, he surely is. And so today he asks, back to confront each of us with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Be careful now, because it's a loaded question, and your answer to the Christ and to Christ alone will reveal to yourself your fundamental relationship with this person, with this

man, with this Christ.

"Who do you say that I am?" May the God of all glory be magnified in our worship, in our response, and what we say to him in answer to this question. And more importantly, by the way we live out this question each and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.