

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16 (p. 12)

FEBRUARY 28, 2021

MARK 8:27-38 (p. 820)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Bless us Father, right now, in this very moment! Fill us with the Power and Presence of your Holy Spirit—with Wonder and Awe! Surround us with your Joy, even as we offer this Prayer. And grant us, please, each one of us, Wisdom and Knowledge and Understanding as we study your Word. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“CLOWN THEOLOGY”

Jesus and His Disciples are in Roman Territory in today's lesson. For the first time in Mark's Gospel, I might add! Prior to this, they have been in and around Galilee. Jewish Territory. An area controlled by Rome. But Jewish, none-the-less! Now they are just across the border though—out on the margins if you will, twenty-five miles north of the sea, in the region of Caesarea Philippi, it says. The context matters!

They are in what we call “The Golan Heights” today. Maybe you've heard of it? This is an area that housed a shrine to the Greek God Pan in Jesus' day, and where pagan worship flourished! They are in the north-eastern corner of modern-day Israel, right on the edge of Lebanon and Syria, less than a day's drive West, of where the US airstrikes happened on Thursday! This is an area of strife and oppression, of war and pagan rituals, a place “on the border”, on multiple levels! And here, Jesus turns to His Disciples and asks, “Who do people say I am?” It's an interesting question, isn't it? Especially given the context. One with profound ramifications. “Who do people say I am?”

Mark's Gospel shifts here in Chapter Eighth. Up until now Mark has talked about Jesus moving around, traveling from town to town, teaching and preaching and healing throughout the region of Galilee. Going back and forth across the lake even! But now, right in the middle of the Gospel, all that changes, as Jesus starts to focus on Jerusalem!

Mark doesn't name the location yet. Not for a couple more Chapters actually. His words begin to change though. Mark begins to use phrases like "on the way", or "on the road", to describe where they are. This is clearly a journey, one with a definite destination in mind! And "along the road", several important things take place! Again, the context is important! It always is! So is what is happening! And to whom! But Jesus' question is even more so! "Who do people say I am"?

So, do you know? I mean, how would you answer that question? What are people around you saying about Jesus? What are they saying on the News? Or on Social Media? In the Halls of Government? In our Schools? "Who do people say I am?", asks Jesus! And they reply, timidly I would think, "Well, some say you're John the Baptist." "And some say you are Elijah, or one of the other Prophets." But then, Jesus turns up the heat considerably! "Okay," He says. "So, what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Imagine being there! Because in some ways, we are! I picture this group of would-be Disciples starting to squirm a bit, don't you? Maybe staring down at their sandals as they shuffle their feet! Maybe someone eventually turns towards Peter, the brash Ringleader for the little group. Or maybe they all do, waiting for him to speak on their behalf!

And he does! After an uncomfortable moment or so, Peter makes a Bold Statement of Faith in answer to Jesus' question, one that rings down through the Ages! "You are the Christ—the Messiah—the Anointed One of God!"

And that settles it, right! For everyone there! For everyone here! It's the same thing we say, right, in making our Confession of Faith! "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God! And I accept Him as my Lord and Savior!" It's a good answer! A great answer! It's the right answer! Only what does it mean?

Oh, we know the rest of the story, what will happen in Jerusalem and after—the Cross, the Empty Tomb, Eternal Life! We've got this Jesus thing all figured out! "You are the Messiah, the Son of God!" And since we have Jesus all figured out, I'm sure we have God all figured out too! We know God is love, for instance, so He smiles all the time! And He is happy all the time, right? What's more, God wants us to smile all the time too, and be happy all the time! I mean, we were created in His Image!

Or maybe not? Maybe God is scary from where you stand? You take the Proverb seriously that says, "The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of all Wisdom"! All that talk of Justice and Wrath in Scripture twists your stomach into knots every time you think about God! You've got it all figured out all right! Only God scares the hell right out of you! And admittedly, some of us need the hell scared right out of us! God is simply too Holy for us to approach!

Or maybe not? Maybe you see God in a different way entirely? And therefore, His anointed Son in a different way entirely as well? But you've got it figured out, right? It's settled, at least in your mind! You know exactly who God is, and exactly how God will respond in any given situation! You know how God will react to the mess around you, and how God will react to the mess within you! You've got it down! God is predictable! Extremely predictable! Right? He doesn't change! The fancy Theological word is "immutable"!

Only contrary to that, is God's own statement to Moses. Tell the people "I AM"! Which according to my Old Testament Professor, translates, "I'll be any damn thing I decide to be"! But you've spent time on this, right? So, you know what God's next move will be. You have the Lord of Heaven and Earth all neatly tucked away in a nice Theological Box! "Who do you say I am?"

Every three years the Lectionary brings us this particular text from Mark. So, every three years I invite a friend of mine to join us at Church. Some of you have met him before. He is pretty faithful at responding! Even with COVID, he was able to make it today. My friend is an Entertainer by trade, and so, dresses the part. So, he might appear a little "strange" at first. But trust me, he also moonlights as a part-time Theologian! And after sitting with him for a while, you will come to realize that he has an uncanny way of explaining deep, Theological concepts—simply, and yet profoundly! Especially when it comes to our own, heart-felt beliefs about God! By the way, his given name is Jack (**Jack in the Box**)! Maybe you remember him?

The first thing that Jack teaches us is; if we do our part, then God will do His! And we are all clear on what those parts are, right? If we faithfully turn the crank, round and round, we can count on God responding on cue! (**Crank**). It's all very predictable! And we rejoice in Theological Predictability, don't we? We like everything about the Creator of Heaven and Earth all neat and tidy! Controllable! We don't mind taking extra time and energy to get it that way either! If we can just get the Clown stuffed down into the box, then everything works like it should! It's even okay if we have to fold down some loose edges, and keep a constant hold on the box itself, all while pushing down on the lid! When it comes to God, things just have to fit!

That extra effort is worth it in the end, right! Just keep the goal in mind—shut the lid and keep it closed! Once you do, you are all set! Once that top is securely fastened into place, Jack is not going to jump out when you don't expect Him to! You're the one in charge now! You've got Him right where you want Him, inside your little box! All you have to do now is turn the crank, just like you were taught! Only when you want to, of course! Only when you are in the mood! You might have to dance a bit when you do, or sway with the music? But in the end, Voila!

And you can turn the crank either fast or slow! It's up to you! And in a panicky situation, you can frantically twist the darned thing, round and round, just as fast as you possibly can! Remember, you're in charge now! You've got it all figured out! Sure, the music may sound a little "tinny" at times! And the volume may not always be as loud as you'd like! But there are no more surprises!

That “Happy Guy”, or that “Scary Guy”, or that “Whatever Guy” will come on the scene at just the right moment, only at the right moment, and in all the prescribed ways, just exactly as you expect! It’s all good! There is only one problem! That’s Clown Theology! And a Clown Theology, ain’t Jack!

At the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark states quite clearly just who Jesus is. “This is the beginning of the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as predicted by the Prophet Isaiah!” Theologically speaking, that means Jesus is so close to God, as much a part of God, that He and God are actually One! That’s a huge Proclamation! And then, just to make sure we didn’t miss that Proclamation, Mark goes on for seven Chapters sharing one miraculous moment after the next, and what all that means!

Jesus is the Majestic One, the Divine One, the One who commands the wind and the waves! He’s the One who miraculously provides bread for the hungry—the One who commands demons to be silent! Couple that with all of the Old Testament Prophecies concerning the Anointed One of God that Jesus literally fulfilled, and Peter couldn’t help but have this Messiah thing pegged! Who wouldn’t have made the Good Confession in answer to Jesus’ pivotal question; “Who do people say I am?” And who wouldn’t, when Jesus asks; “Who do you say that I am?” along with Peter answer, “You are the Christ, of course, the Son of the Living God!” I get the question! And I love the question! And I share Peter’s answer from the very depths of my being! But have you ever asked yourself, or better yet wrestled with yourself, over what that means?

That's actually the question, isn't it? What were Peter's thoughts, his expectations when he said that? What are yours, when you do? What were Peter's beliefs in this Profound Christological Statement? What are yours? Remember, empty words, are just words!

Let me give you some context. Other than a brief period, before Peter was even born, his Nation has lived under the oppressive rule of foreign governments for hundreds and hundreds of years. First it was the Assyrians, then the Babylonians (modern-day Iraq), then the Persians (modern-day Iran)! Then came the Greeks, and now the Romans! It was thought by many in Israel that Messiah would come as a Conquering King, from the line of David, and would sit on David's throne forever! Many were looking for Messiah to throw off the yoke of slavery and free the people! Make Israel Great Again!

Others though, were looking to the fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies. They were convinced that Elijah would appear before God's Final Judgment at the End of Time, as it is written! They thought that's who Messiah would be! And knowing their Bible well, that's how they believed Jesus should act!

Still other believed that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead! A fiery Warning of Repentance is what they expected Him to preach! "Who do people say I am," asks Jesus! "Better yet, who do you say that I am?" How would you answer that, if you were there? How do you answer that now? "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" "I accept you as my Lord, not just my Savior!" But what, exactly does that mean?

What are your expectations for the Messiah? Your beliefs about Him? Your desires for Him? We talk a lot about “Following” Jesus as Lord, about being a Disciple of Christ! But can you articulate what that looks like? For us as a Church? For you as an individual? Have you got it all figured out?

Did you notice that right in the middle of today’s encounter with Peter and the Disciples, Jesus says that the Son of Man must suffer? Many things, in fact! He will be rejected by the Elders and Chief Priests, by the Teachers of the Law, by all the Religious Leaders! He will be killed by Government Officials. Nailed to a Cross! And placed in a Tomb! Then, after three days, He will rise to New Life! He spoke “plainly about this”, it says, “not in parables or complicated twists of speech”! Jesus made it clear for all who are actually listening! Crystal Clear, in fact! But Peter, not wanting any part of that “Piece of the Plan”, takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him!

Which brings up an even more interesting question! Have you ever rebuked Jesus? Have you argued with the Lord even, or simply ignored Him? Maybe you didn’t want to hear what He had to say? To rebuke someone means to “warn them strongly” or even “punish them”. “No way Jesus! That is not what I had in mind! If that’s what you think we are going to do, then you have another thing coming!” The thought of rebuking Jesus makes me squirm! How many times have I done that? It reminds me of a question Gary Waterson asked in a Sunday School Class recently. I’m paraphrasing, so bear with me. “Why do Christians tend to resist, the God they claim to trust so much?” Have you ever rebuked Jesus? Look how Jesus responds!

Mark tells us that Jesus, in turn, started rebuking Peter! Has that ever happened to you? How did that work out for you? “Get behind me Satan! You don’t have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns!”

They say Confession is good for the soul. So, I have a Confession. When I was young, and growing up in the Church, I always read this statement as, “Get lost Peter! You are obviously filled with evil! Get behind me! Get out of my way!” I thought, at the time, I had it all figured out! Only that’s not what Jesus actually says here! Not at all! He didn’t tell Peter to get lost. He said, “Get behind me”. What if He meant, “Get back in line Peter, you need to follow some more! You haven’t quite got it yet! Stay behind me, and stay in step! Don’t run ahead, and don’t fall behind! Just get behind me Peter, on this Glorious Journey of God!”

I mean, the very next thing that happens is Jesus calls together the crowds, along with the Disciples, and explains to all of them that, “Whoever wants to be my Disciple must deny themselves, take up their Cross, and follow me!” So, in context, what does that say?

“Deny yourself”! Have you ever considered what that means? It’s the same Greek word used in Luke 22:34 when Peter is standing around the campfire as Jesus stands before Pilate. Remember, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me!” Deny means “to disown”, or “disregard”. Peter states that he has “no connection with Jesus at all”, in order to save his own skin! “Deny yourself”, says Jesus. What does that mean?

These are the only places in the entire New Testament where that particular word is used! Peter denying Jesus, and Jesus saying we must deny ourselves! “Whoever wants to be my Disciple, who truly desires to follow me, must first set aside their own interests, and focus on the interests of God!” “Whoever wants to find life, for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel, must stop focusing on what they desire, or want, or think they want! To follow me means to focus on what God wants! That’s a very different take on some of our “modern-day” Theologies, isn’t it?

And so is the next part! “Take up your Cross”! What does that actually mean? Could it have multiple dimensions? Take up the daily crosses that will naturally come your way. Normal suffering and problems are simply part of the human experience! Everyone has them! So, deal with them, and in the way that Jesus would deal with them!

But could “Taking up your Cross” also mean, to grasp hold of whatever specific Cross God lays before you, whatever mission or ministry God has in mind? Lean into it even! Actively choose to pick it up and carry it out into the world! Do what God wants you to do, those “good works which God prepared in advance for us to do”, mentioned in Ephesians 2:10!

Don’t go looking for the biggest Cross you can find! But don’t search for a Cross like everyone else is carrying either! Or a little one that’s easy to shoulder! Instead, stoop down and seize the Cross the Lord has placed before you! Whatever that Cross may be! Wherever that Cross may lay! And then, carry it to the best of your God-given ability!

The last part of Jesus' Command is for us "to follow". Go where I go, He says. Do what I do. Say what I say, nothing more, and nothing less! Just step out in Faith on this Journey! Just step up in Love! Simply follow me!

I wonder if prior to this encounter, Peter thought he had it all figured out? I mean he was a long-time Believer, right, a good Jewish Boy since birth! He had the Lord in a nice, neat theological box, and was most likely ready to close the lid. Peter had attended Synagogue since he was a child, traveled with his family up to Jerusalem on all the High Holy Days, Worshipped at the Temple!

Peter knew the Law. He understood the message of the Prophets! Peter knows the history and the traditions, all the right things to do, and say! He has even given up fishing to travel with Jesus for a while, at least when he thought he knew where they were going! Peter, like most of us Peters, has it all figured out! So, he is just cranking away on the box as the music plays! But then Jesus suddenly decides to jump out and surprise him!

God does that you know! God tends to surprise us! Can you imagine being an eighty-year-old farmer, like Moses, and hearing God say, "I want you to go to Egypt and set my people free"? Can you imagine being Abraham at ninety-nine, and God telling you that He is about to fulfill His promise to you, and make you the Father of a Great Nation!

It's Taco Tuesday in the hot Arizona sun, and you are sitting around the shuffleboard courts when you get the news. "I know you are retired," says the Lord, "and Medicare probably won't cover it, but you are going to have a son!" You'd laugh too, wouldn't you? Can you imagine being Sarah at ninety, as you are wheeled from the Geriatric Ward to the Maternity Ward, wondering how the Pack-n-Play is going to fit under the card table at Bridge Club! The lid just flew off of her Theological Box, didn't it! Can you imagine?

How sure are you, that you have it all figured out? How open are you, how receptive are you, to what God is saying to you right here and now? Jesus speaks plainly! "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his Cross and follow me." How does that fit with a Clown Theology?

Maybe we don't have it all figured out quite yet? And maybe we don't need to?

However, we know enough to step out onto the road, and begin the Journey, don't we!

Forget Cranking! Just Follow! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Silently Lord, we kneel before you in prayer. Quietly and humbly Lord, we open up our hearts to you. We know that you hear our every sigh, and that you listen for our deepest needs. You feel our every ache and pain, and your heart is always in tune with ours. But please, in this time of prayer, make our hearts in tune with yours as well.

Thank you for listened to the stirrings within us Lord, during this quiet time of prayer. Thank you for searching our hearts and our minds, and for discovering the dark and fearful places within. Thank you for hearing our voiced concerns Lord, as well as our silent ones, and for accepting our praise as a Symphony to your Glory. Thank you also Lord, for listening to our melody of prayer on behalf of our dearly beloved. Please, Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit on them right now. We lift up

Please bless each of these lives with health and comfort. Bless each of their spirits with your Spirit. Shower Grace on their world, and fill their hearts with Peace and Love. And please, grant Wisdom and Guidance to each and all! For together, Lord, we place these loved ones into your care.

Father, we ask for your blessings on our lives as well. We too need your Abundant Love and your Omnipotent Guidance. We too need your Peace and your Support, and most of all your Spirit Lord, poured out upon our lives! Equip us now, please, and motivate us to faithfully do your Will. And strengthen us for the days ahead, and all that we will face.

Help each one of us Lord, to see your Face, to recognize your Smile, and to sense the Loving Embrace of your Arms around us! And help us to make you proud of all the things we say and do! We ask this, Lord, in the Name of our Risen Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ! And we pray together now the very prayer that He has taught us, saying...