

Delivered at Absecon Presbyterian Church on Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021 by Rev. Dr. Bill Gaskill, Pulpit Supply

Let me start you off with a cheese steak story, of which I have quite a few but you'll only have to endure one of them. Years ago now, Jean and I went to a little place in Cherry Hill called Cosmo's. It's long gone now, but I went there to get a cheese steak for lunch. We sat down in a booth and an elderly couple came in and sat in the booth behind me. Then the harangue began, the woman belittling this poor old man, presumably her husband. On and on she went and he just sat there mutely taking her abuse. I remember the punch line of her complaint to this day, all these years later: "You're the biggest disappointment of my entire life!" There was such disgust and venom in her voice. She said it more than once as if to underline her bitterness. Even my cheese steak tasted rotten after that. I felt both angry and sad for her poor husband. I guess he just wasn't meeting her expectations.

In another sad story, Bill and Joyce had a long marriage and a deep love and affection for one another. They were very near to retirement and had plans for being together for many years in that next season of life. She worked in Philadelphia and very near the end of her career, in a parking garage in the city, she was mugged and severely beaten. She had about \$20 in her purse which was the prize her assailants got for their violence. Bill got to minister to her in her hospital bed for the remainder of her life. She had brain damage and was totally disabled. Life took a horrible turn in an instant. Things just didn't work out as they had hoped and planned.

Bill is still alive today and has managed to go on living without her for many years after she went home to be with Jesus. When my son Jon died, it was Bill who some months later gently tried to comfort and encourage me. He said, "This is going to take a long time, but you'll get through it." He'd paid the price to say it and I was blessed by his counsel and compassion.

Jesus told the truth when he said, "In the world you have tribulation." Life has a way of taking us to places we never imagined and to places we never wished to go. When that happens, then what?

In 1985 a small group from my congregation joined a larger group going to the Holy Land from a large church in Wilmington. The pastor and his wife were leading us, along with our Israeli tour guide. I remember going all the way north, passing through a border check point and arriving at Caesarea Philippi. This woman said that they had sons, but if they had a daughter she would have named her Caesarea Philippi, to which I simply say, thank God for little boys!

Our passage today is set in that same place and marks the turning point in the Gospel of Mark. You might say it's all downhill from here. I can do no better than William Barclay who described the spot this way: "Caesarea Philippi was outside Galilee altogether. It was not in the territory of Herod, but in the territory of Philip. It was a town with an amazing history. In the oldest days it was called *Balinas*, for it had once been a great center of the worship of Baal....up on the hillside there was a cavern which was said to be the birthplace of the Greek God, Pan, the god of nature. From a cave on the hillside gushed forth a stream which was held

to be the source of the River Jordan. Farther up on the hillside rose a gleaming godhead of Caesar, the Roman Emperor, the ruler of the world, who was regarded as a god.”

It was as though Jesus had to take his closest disciples outside their comfort zone, we call that liminal space, up to the land of bogus idolatry and misguided religion mixed with imperial politics to get them to focus, to clarify what it was they really believed about him.

When you think about it each of us must make spiritual choices amidst a swirling morass of religious and cultural claims, appealing to our plans and dreams and seeking first place among our loyalties and commitments. There is much competition for how we will spend our time, our money, our loves, and our very lives. We live in Caesarea Philippi.

Typically, Jesus starts off with a question: “Who do people say that I am?” That’s safe enough. They’d heard the religious gossip swirling around them as they went from town to town, witnessing Jesus performing all kinds of powerful signs and wonders, healing and restoring broken people to health and wholeness. They’d heard him take on the most sophisticated religious leaders and never once lose an argument or spiritual contest. So they answered, “John the Baptist (who had already been beheaded); and others, Elijah (who was deemed to be one of Israel’s greatest prophets and who it was traditionally believed would reappear as a forerunner of the coming Messiah ); and still others, one of the prophets (by people who were simply impressed by the power of Jesus’ teachings).”

John was dead, Elijah was dead, and the prophets had not been heard from for hundreds of years since Malachi died. Was there embedded in their minds no more than a superstitious belief in the resurrection among the religious population of that time? It probably didn’t run much deeper than that. Life went on and people lived it just as they always had. Their beliefs didn’t much effect what they did on Monday or Thursday, just like many people today.

Of course Jesus had little interest in religious gossip or belief that didn’t change a life, theirs, or today yours and mine. So next came the question aimed at their hearts like a guided missile: “But who do you say that I am?” We know Peter’s answer: “You are the Messiah.”

Putting Peter aside for a moment, how would you answer that question? Who do you say Jesus is? Every moment of every day Jesus’ guided missile is aimed directly at your heart and mine. Who is Jesus for you? How does knowing him effect and direct your life, what you think, how you feel, how you speak, and what you do? I don’t know anybody, myself included, who would not benefit from spending time daily with that question. Who do you say Jesus is?

You are the Messiah! What’s wrong with that? It sounds like the exact right answer, but the problem comes with the definition. What is a messiah anyway? Peter based his confession upon all that he had seen and heard up until that point. Blind eyes were opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame legs healed, gravity defied during a water walk, wind and waves obeying Jesus’ command to be still. All that and more! This is just the kind of Messiah for which we’ve been longing! Can it get any better?

No, but things were about to take a turn, about to get a whole lot worse than these starry-eyed disciples could ever have imagined. And Jesus, ever honest and up front with his

followers began to describe his impending passion in somewhat grisly detail. And Peter, wanting to be a good friend began to rebuke Jesus: “No Lord, this will never happen to you, not as long as I’m around it won’t.”

Maybe you’ve had an experience like this. Let’s say someone you love is diagnosed with a deadly cancer. You see them begin to cave in, to lose hope of living, getting depressed and succumbing to despair. And you say things like, “Don’t give up hope. We love you. We’ll be there for you. We’ll pray for a miracle of healing. You’ll make it!” It’s all well meaning, well intentioned, filled with love and good will. Sometimes our optimism is right. Many times it’s not.

Jesus saw Peter’s words as a satanic attack. What he was about to face was hard enough without a bunch of sentiment getting in his way. There is a chilling verse at the end of Jesus’ wilderness temptations in the desert following his baptism that says Satan, after throwing at Jesus every temptation, withdrew from him until a more opportune time. And he did return at times like this, using unwitting human voices to deliver his barbs. He returned as Jesus hung on the cross through the voices of religious bystanders and crucified thieves. Save yourself. Save us. Come down from there and you’ll have us all on your side. Of course we know, if Jesus had saved himself, none of us would be.

Peter’s mind was set on human things. He wanted things to go according to human plans, human desires, things that alleviated and ameliorated the tribulations of this world. He was trying his best to be a good friend, but he was misguided. He just didn’t understand. In his mind a messiah was given by God to bring us to that place where all our trials would be over.

But it doesn’t work that way. It didn’t then and it doesn’t now. So Jesus, ever truthful, said this: “Those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”

If you want to know how popular losers are, just listen to sports talk radio for a while. The Phillies are bums! The Flyers stink. The Eagles organization is one of the worst in the NFL. We’re sick of losers. We want a winner. We’re sick of the process, of rebuilding, of waiting until next year. Caller after caller put on air to complain.

Jesus has just announced in no uncertain terms that according to the world’s way of evaluating people, the disciples have left everything they ever knew, thinking about glory and honor for themselves along with Jesus, only to find out that they’ve cast their lot in with a colossal loser. And they flirted with being ashamed, ashamed of their own credulity and ashamed that they’d fallen for Jesus. So Jesus went right into their wheelhouse and said, “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Things aren’t always what they seem. Our plans for our lives rarely match the plan that God has for us. God’s ways are, more often than not, inscrutable. My late brother-in-law was fond

of saying, "It's not what you don't know that will hurt you; it's what you know that ain't so, that's what will hurt you." We think we know but we don't.

Peter thought he knew just what a messiah was and how he would do God's will. I've thought the same thing from time to time, and if I may be so bold, so have you. It's what fallen humans do. We can be both arrogant and presumptuous. But God loves us too much to let us get away with it. Our name is not Satan. Our names are written in the Lamb's book of life. God is relentlessly teaching us to develop a divine mindset. As Paul admonished the Philippians, "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus," going on from there to teach us the value of humility. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And part of that will is that we begin to see beyond the trials of this world to the eternal weight of glory that awaits us.

I have two very dear, long-time friends in New Hampshire named Al and Nancy. Both are deeply devoted to Jesus Christ. Some years ago, they turned their home over to a beloved daughter and her family after doing an addition which became their separate, semi-private residence. It worked pretty well for a time, but then tensions arose over all the little irritants and little violations of privacy, which became uncomfortable conflicts. They began to take trips just to get a little respite from the convoluted family dynamics that had become problematic.

Then the pandemic hit. Their daughter got Covid 19, but no one else in the family did. Her eventual recovery seemed like a miracle. So did the fact that everyone else living in such close quarters escaped infection. My friends did not get vaccinated thinking the vaccines were not researched enough and the risks were too high.

Then they both contracted severe cases of the virus. Nancy was admitted to the hospital while Al battled it out at home. Nancy spent some time literally at death's door. She coughed painfully and was battling for each breath. She did not want to go on a ventilator. They had her doing something called proning, which I had to Google to find out what it was. It is a relatively new and experimental technique of lying on your stomach because breathing in that position expands lung capacity ever so slightly. Typically, six medical people are on hand to assist the patient. Nancy worked hard for hours each day, just to survive and breathe. Hundreds of people were mobilized for prayer and she did survive. I'll call it a miracle, unashamedly so.

A few days after she returned home, I spoke with her on the phone. One thing she said that I want you to hear: "This has been the hardest thing I've ever been through, and the best thing that has ever happened to me. I feel so close to Jesus, and my love for him is the purest it has ever been."

It seems to me that that is how God's Kingdom works most powerfully, out of weakness comes strength, out of death, resurrection. In light of that, what kind of messiah do you serve? Who do you say Jesus is? And if following him closely enough that you are led into some really hard places, do you still want to go?

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 8:27-38 (NRSV) ***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. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo ***great suffering***, and be rejected by the ***elders***, the ***chief*** priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three ***days*** ***rise*** again. He said all this quite openly. And ***Peter*** took him aside and ***began to rebuke*** him. But ***turning*** and looking at his ***disciples***, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, ***Satan***! For you are setting your mind not on ***divine things*** but on ***human*** things." He called the ***crowd*** with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their ***cross*** and ***follow*** me. For those who want to ***save*** their life will ***lose*** it, and those who lose their ***life*** for my ***sake***, and for the sake of the ***gospel***, will save it. For what will it ***profit*** them to ***gain*** the whole ***world*** and ***forfeit*** their life? Indeed, what can they ***give*** in ***return*** for their life? Those who are ***ashamed*** of me and of my ***words*** in this adulterous and sinful ***generation***, of them the ***Son*** of ***Man*** will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his ***Father*** with the ***holy*** angels."