

Listen to Him

Last week we heard Casey offer a beautiful reflection on Jesus' rejection in his hometown and Herod's fear and eventual execution of John the Baptist. In the verses that follow in Mark's gospel, it becomes increasingly apparent that Rome is not the only power that feels unsettled by Jesus. While Jesus is feeding thousands, healing outsiders, and freeing others from demons, Mark tells us that the religious leaders are growing nervous, too. They come from Jerusalem and confront Jesus about what they believe is a disregard for tradition. Jesus pushes back and continues healing and feeding and teaching. [Read Mark 8:27-9:1]

Mark has moved us along at a breakneck pace. All those *immediatels* and the trips back and forth and in and around Galilee with a few long pauses here and there have the disciples—and us—wanting to catch our breath. And here—for the briefest of moments—we get one very short rest stop. As my friend and colleague Pen Peery writes:

Caesarea Philippi...in the foothills of Mount Hermon ... [gives] one a view across Galilee toward Jerusalem. [And as scholar Lamar Williamson points out, here] 'Jesus invites his disciples to look back across the Galilean ministry and reflect on who he is, then to look ahead and understand that they are "on the way" not only to Caesarea Philippi, but also to Jerusalem, to suffering, to death, and to resurrection.'¹

So as Pen notes, this is a fulcrum text for Mark's gospel, a pivot text, between before and after. Up until now, the disciples have followed without asking too many questions, awed it seems by the wonders they are witnessing and devoted to this one who is determined to share the good news of God's unfailing love in word and deed. They have been baffled at times, stumped by the parables or by how to feed crowds from a snack in their backpacks or by how to cast out demons. My hunch is that the grumblings of the religious leaders and

¹ Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark*, 151, as cited by Peery in his paper for The Well in 2012

the Roman authorities have also been unnerving for this ragtag band of disciples, and still, they continue to follow, keeping up as best they can. And now Jesus turns and asks them two questions: Who do *they* say that I am? And who do *you* say that I am?

I've typically read this text with an emphasis on *you*, on Jesus' turning his focus to those who are closest to him: *You have been with me, you have witnessed all that I have done and said, so I want to know what you make of it, what you make of me.* I still firmly believe that his turn toward them is intentional, **and** I find it compelling that he asks them not what they think or what they believe, but what they *say*. *Who do you say that I am?* And Peter alone responds: *You are the Messiah, the Christ.*

In chapter 1 verse 1, the writer introduces the gospel with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." And until Peter's response here in chapter 8, there is no mention of the word *christos* which is translated as Christ or Messiah. The case has been building, and Peter is now convinced, or so he thinks. But as Jesus goes on to explain what exactly his being the Messiah entails, Peter is appalled. This suffering and cross-picking-up business is not at all what Peter has in mind. He thinks Jesus has lost *his* mind, and he says so, rebuking Jesus as if he is one possessed. And then Jesus rebukes him, calling out the unholy delusion that Jesus as Messiah could somehow avoid the suffering and death that his ministry and mission are bound to provoke. Jesus will not simply ride in and restore ancient Israel to its former glory and have everyone be friends. This is no kumbaya moment. It can't be; it can't work that way, not because Jesus is simply fated to die at the hands of the powers that be, but because Jesus' kind of power, his insistence on love, service, inclusion, peace, mercy, and justice is diametrically opposed to all that Rome and the religious elite stand for and count on. Jesus' way of leading and ruling cannot be allowed to gain traction, cannot be allowed to thrive, let alone triumph. The empire will do everything in its power to stop it, to stop him. And Jesus feels compelled to say so.

What we say matters, of course, about anything. And what we say about Jesus matters in a profound way. It is one thing to think certain things about Jesus. Thoughts we can keep to ourselves. There is a powerful vulnerability and courage in saying what we believe out loud. In a few moments, together we will say what we believe, using an affirmation created from the statements of faith written by this year's confirmands. As I read

back over their words—what they wrote and later spoke out loud about Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit and the church with the session on Tuesday evening, I was humbled and awed. These young people have helped me and my faith by reminding me to understand God as best friend, mentor, savior, and creator, to emphasize that we are all God’s children, and to embrace a biblical call to alleviate suffering. They have been listening, and they have the courage to say what they believe.

Less than a week after Peter’s confession and Jesus’ rebuke of Peter and Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, Jesus heads up a mountain with James and John, and yes, Peter. [Read Mark 9:2-8]

Peter has managed to find his way out of the doghouse, not because of anything he has done or who he is, but because of who Jesus is. So, Peter along with James and John has a front row seat to this stunning mountaintop moment where they now hear God confirm the claim God made at Jesus’ baptism, that Jesus is in fact God’s beloved Son. And they hear God give them a direct order—the only word spoken directly by God to anyone other than Jesus in Mark’s gospel: “Listen to him.”

As these three walk down the mountain with Jesus by their side, they meet up with other disciples who have been stymied and flummoxed, struggling to do what Jesus insists they have the power to do. Jesus and the disciples will soon be in the thick of voices insisting who Jesus is and is not. The Roman authorities and the religious elites will conspire to silence Jesus and bring an abrupt end to the kingdom he is ushering in. Jesus will go on to spell out explicitly twice more what lies ahead, even as the voices of fear and terror grow louder. And Peter will stumble, but he won’t try to correct Jesus again.

We too live in a world where voices swirl around us, shouting at us to be afraid, to grab all we can, to look out for number one, to trample anyone and anything in our way, and to demonize those who look, live, love, think, vote, and pray differently than we do. And these voices push us to make statements and take stands and choose sides—one side, their side, not the other side, whatever the other side might be. Neither students nor Gen Xers nor Boomers nor retirees nor anyone else is immune. This toxic fog engulfs all of us, and it is overwhelming, leaving us, including me—yes, even me, who is almost never at a loss for words—tongue-tied. And then we hear God’s voice call out amidst the fog: “This is my Son the beloved; listen to him.” As one

of our confirmands has said: "I believe that we should listen to Jesus and live as he has directed us to live." I want to be clear: there are times that our faith requires that we speak out and stand up, but I think there is a crucial first step before we do. Listen to him. Listen to Jesus. Listen to what he actually says, not what others insist that he *meant* to say. Listen to him. Listen to Jesus not only when he is glowing on the mountaintop but also when he is kneeling in the dirt to bring sight to a beggar. Listen to him not only when he is walking on water but also when he is raising a dying child to life. Listen to Jesus not only when he is celebrating God's concern for every hair on our heads but also when he is demanding that we forgive others seventy times seven. Listen to Jesus not only when he is feeding thousands but also when he is calling us to risk everything for the sake of his kingdom. Listen to Jesus, and listen to him again, and keep listening to him, and then by the grace of God we will know what to say.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.