

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ *They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*

¹⁵ *“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”*

¹⁶ *Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

¹⁷ *Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)*

Who do You Say Jesus is?

This past week, I read an article in which a columnist argued that Texas governor Rick Perry “doesn’t know didley-squat about the Bible.” It turns out that Governor Perry said, “Many want to recognize Jesus as a good teacher, but nothing more. But why call him ‘good’ if he has lied about his claims of deity?” Now, I am not endorsing or opposing Governor Perry’s campaign. But he did say something very important about our faith. In response, the columnist argued that Jesus never claimed to be either God or the Messiah. In fact, he said that none of the four gospels make the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. That statement is just ridiculous. He backed it up with a bunch of pseudo-intellectual mumbo-jumbo, and if you’re interested in knowing more, I’d be happy to talk to you about it later. But as Jesus shows us this morning, there is a huge difference between what people say about him and what he says about himself. In the end, it doesn’t matter what people like that columnist think. What matters is what you think and what I think. On Judgment Day, God is going to judge us on the basis of the faith in our hearts. So, the second question Jesus asked in our gospel lesson for today is the most important question you will ever hear: **Who do you say Jesus is?**

I.

Most people in America who consider themselves to be smart and educated would agree with what that journalist said. Their thinking inspires the way that television and movies and music and the internet present God. In this environment, where do we find the truth? **Who do you say Jesus is? The right answer is God’s answer.**

Jesus asked, **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** Jesus chose to use the term “Son of Man” for himself. In Daniel chapter 7, one “like a son of man” is led into the Father’s presence and is given an eternal kingdom with power over all creation. Now, in Hebrew and Aramaic, “son of man” is a way of saying “human being.” But what God says in Daniel 7 is that one *like* a human being enters the Father’s presence and rules over all things forever. Clearly, he is more than *just* a human being. When Jesus called himself “the Son of Man,” he was saying, “I’m the one God was talking about, the one that looks human but is far more than human – the judge and ruler of the universe.” But Jesus knew that people don’t always hear what we say. They hear what they want to hear. And he also knew that his disciples were regular guys – fishermen mostly – and they knew what people were saying. So he started this conversation by asking them what popular opinion was saying about him.

The answer he got had a biblical ring to it. They said, **“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** The key to understanding this answer is the Old Testament book of Malachi. In chapter 3, God said that he was going to send a messenger – a prophet – to prepare the way for his coming. In chapter 4, he called that messenger Elijah. Now, he did not mean that Elijah was going to come back from heaven. He meant that God was going to send a prophet like Elijah – John the Baptist. But some people of Jesus’ day thought that Elijah himself would come back. Others thought that another prophet would come back from the dead – maybe Jeremiah or even John the Baptist. That answer seems strange to us. But many Bible scholars of Jesus’ day held to some variation of that idea. They all had missed the point because they all assumed Jesus was the messenger who went before God, not God himself.

From that day until ours, people have come up with many answers to the question who is Jesus? They never recognize his two principal claims: he is the Son of God and he is the promised Messiah, the promised Savior. You must understand the danger this presents to us today. Many people sound smart. But you cannot allow the degrees behind a person's name to intimidate you. You cannot allow their years of study and the books they've written to convince you that they know more about Jesus than you do, when they deny that the Bible teaches that he is your Savior and the Son of God. You cannot allow popular opinion to carry you away.

Jesus didn't let the disciples blindly follow what society said. He forced them to accept responsibility for their own confession. He asked, **"But what about you? Who do you say I am?"** Peter gave us a wonderful answer: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** Christ is Jesus' title. It means Messiah. It means the promised Savior. Only the true Son of God could be that Savior. How did Jesus answer Peter? Did he say, "Peter, you're not paying attention! I'm not the Son of God. I'm the Son of Man!"? Did he sigh and ask him where he got that dumb answer from? Did he gently try to lead him to a better answer? No. Jesus said, **"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."** Jesus said, "Peter you're right!" Anyone who says that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah or the Son of God clearly doesn't know didley-squat about the Bible!

But that shouldn't surprise us because Jesus tells us the only place that the right answer can possibly come from: God. God works through his Word. The difference between us and all people who study the Bible but don't understand it is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we hear the gospel, God reaches into our hearts and creates faith in Jesus as our Savior. We don't deserve that. We couldn't choose for that to happen. Left to ourselves, we'd have just as wrong an answer as anybody else. But through that gospel God has taught us to confess what Peter confessed: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

II.

I like being right – and not just about God. It's human nature to revel in being right. Sometimes, that can make us smug and hard to deal with. But if you need to know how to find somebody's house, you might have to put up with getting the right answer from someone who likes to be right. If you were lost in the desert and you needed to find help within a few hours or you'd die, you wouldn't care how likeable the person was who gave you the right directions. All that would matter would be their information. Knowing the right answer about Jesus is far more important than knowing information that would save your life here. **Who do you say Jesus is? The right answer triumphs over sin and hell.**

Jesus said, **"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."** The man we call Peter was actually named Simon. Peter "the rock" was his nickname. Jesus first called him Peter between two and three years before this. Jesus was not saying that he would build his church on the man, Peter. In fact, he used a slightly different Greek word when he spoke of the rock he would build his church on, a word that implies a cliff. His point was the confession Peter made. That's the rock. On that confession, Jesus builds his Church. No one who denies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God is a Christian.

But to us who make that confession, Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against us. Perhaps the easiest way to understand this is to think of the gates of hell is as the gates of a prison. In my last church, I used to do quite a bit of prison ministry. When I went to visit a prison, I was always on my best behavior, because I wanted to leave when I was done. The gates and doors of a prison are built to lock people in. The gates of hell lock all sinners inside God's prison. The fact that so many people don't want to listen to the Bible is evidence of the fact that they are doomed to hell. The temptation that we feel to follow the smart guys, to follow what our society believes is a temptation to let ourselves be locked back in that prison. The fact that we are tempted at all shows the natural sin of our hearts. We were all born doomed to that prison.

But the good news that Peter confessed blasts the gates of hell right off their hinges! Jesus is the Christ. He's the Savior that God promised to send. He blasted the gates of hell open by dying and rising for us. He suffered hell itself for us on the cross. There, God locked him away from the Father's love, away from the Father's mercy and grace. That pain and that separation from God are the heart of hell. Jesus suffered that hell for you and me. Because he is the Son of God, his hell was more than enough to pay the hell that the whole world owes God. When Jesus died, he suffered the death that every person deserves. He suffered the death that we deserve. He died paid for the sins in our hearts and for our weakness and our desire to follow the people around us instead of following God. When he rose, he opened the gates of hell forever.

So we are free. And that freedom extends even to this life. The devil wants to keep us from walking through that open gate. Every intellectual out there who thinks he knows more than we do about Jesus is trying to convince us that the gate isn't really open and we should stay in hell. In every pain and hardship we suffer, the devil asks where God is and why we have to go through all this. He's trying to get us to give up on Jesus and stay in hell. And the sinner that still lives in our hearts honestly believes that God is lying to us and that we don't need Jesus because there aren't gates out there. But the gates of hell will not prevail against us. They're broken and twisted and lying on the ground! They can't hold us in as long as we trust in Jesus. He will keep our faith alive until we reach eternal life by constantly reminding us of who he is and what he has done for us.

That truth is so powerful that we can use it to help each other. Jesus said to Peter, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** In the past, governments didn't just rely on gates to keep the prisoners in. Quite often, they chained them so that even if the gates were opened, they couldn't escape. Jesus gives us the power to chain sinners to their sin. If a person refuses to repent, if they say that their sin is no big deal, if they insist they have a right to live the way they want to and they don't want to hear what God says about it, we have the power to chain them to their sins. If they die in that unbelief, they will spend eternity in hell.

Why would we ever do that? For no other reason than love. When someone won't turn from their sin, they need to be bound so that they want to be set free. Then Jesus gives us the power to set each other free. When a brother or sister is tormented by their sin, when they hate the guilt they feel, when someone is sorry that they've sinned, we have the power to forgive them. When we announce that forgiveness, their chains fall off and they escape from hell. It's not just pastors and teachers who have that power. You have that power. Use it! Give peace to each other by assuring each other that you are free.

That gospel message triumphs over guilt and sin and death and hell. God gives us that message in many different ways. At the beginning of our service, you heard me announce it when I forgave you. In a few minutes, we will celebrate communion for the forgiveness of our sins. Sunday after Sunday I proclaim it to you. And all that gospel is the power of God. It always sets us free.

We had special evidence of that power the last time we celebrated communion. I didn't notice it myself, but my wife pointed it out to me. That Sunday, every one of the youth confirmands from last spring took communion. I don't say that to pat them on the back. I say that because I'm thankful to God for their faith. The confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God brought those young people back to hear the word again. They came to communion to be assured again that their chains are cut and the gates of hell are open and they are free. When they knelt and received the body and blood of Christ, their faith was renewed and their confession strengthened. That's what God does for us through the gospel. Keep coming and hearing that message. Keep making that confession in your life. Amen.