

WHO AM I?

ISAIAH 51:1-6

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MATTHEW 16:13-20

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JESUS WAS HEADING FOR CAESAREA PHILIPPI

Seems he could not get far enough away from Galilee. No doubt he wanted to leave all the conflicts behind: conflicts with his family, conflicts with the Jewish leaders, and even some conflicts with his disciples. First he heads over towards the coast where he encounters a Canaanite woman. Then he turns back east and pushes north towards the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi. The city was once called Paneas. Herod the Great built a temple honoring the divinity of Augustus and renamed the city Caesarea. His son Herod Philip, not wanting to be outdone or considered disloyal by the new emperor, Tiberius, greatly enlarged the city, dedicated it to Tiberius, and re-named it Caesarea Philippi, after himself! The city had become a favorite R & R site for Roman

Soldiers on leave: No doubt its motto was, "What happened in CP, stayed in CP"!

QUESTION:

Why in the world is Jesus going *there*? That's like a Holiness preacher taking his congregation to Vegas.

Note: Matthew tells us that Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, that is to say he drew near to the city, but apparently did not enter it. And after his question to Peter and the rest, he left and returned to Galilee on his way to Jerusalem. What are to make of this?

Caesarea represents Rome and its Emperor. Remember that Augustus had been proclaimed a God and Tiberius thus referred to himself as "The son of God". Also remember that Augustus saw himself as the savior of the World, the bringer of Peace on Earth. It is in the shadow of the first two Emperors of Rome that Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say **I** am?"

BUT JESUS BEGAN WITH AN EASIER QUESTION:

“Who do *men* say that I am?” In other words Jesus is asking for the latest poll results. The disciples report that some say Jesus is John the Baptist, miraculously raised from the dead...a curious position. Herod, we know, was one who believed that. Others thought Jesus was Elijah...widespread belief had it that Elijah would return to earth...perhaps in his fiery chariot...just before the end-time, just before the Day of the Lord when God himself would return to the earth to defend Israel. For reasons no one knows, some thought Jesus was Jeremiah raised from the dead. Well, those answers are totally wrong.

JESUS THEN POSES THE QUESTION HE CARES ABOUT.

The one which really matters: he looks into the eyes of the Twelve and asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds for the Twelve...they have obviously been talking it over among themselves. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Now these are just common

folk, mostly illiterate. How did they come up with this answer? Jesus tells us by saying "Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven." The disciples could not come to the correct answer on their own. It had to be revealed by God Himself.

JESUS GOES ON TO MAKE A REVELATION OF HIS OWN.

First he renames Simon. From now on he will be Peter which means Rock. Remember when God wanted to create a new people He began by renaming Abram, Abraham. The Church which Jesus is about to mention is thus the New Israel, the Israel defined not by blood but by faith. It will thus be a community open to all the peoples of the world. "You are Peter, and upon this 'rock' I will build my church". To be a part of this people, one need only be able to confess Jesus to be God's Anointed and God's Son. This of course comes as a gift from God, the gift of Faith. The gift in turn will come to those who

hear the apostolic preaching, a preaching founded on the rock of God's revelation of Jesus' identity

THERE IS A PROBLEM HOWEVER, AND IT SURFACES IMMEDIATELY.

Like all Revelations from God, this one is open to human interpretation; which means that it is also open to misinterpretation. The "Rock" has very distinct ideas about what it means to be God's Messiah and God's Son. When Jesus goes on to reveal the meaning of those words as involving suffering, rejection, and death, Peter explodes. "The devil you say!" Or more precisely, Peter tells Jesus that's the devil talking, not God. God couldn't mean that.' No, Jesus tells Peter, the devil is talking through you. "Get behind me, Satan."

MATTHEW TRANSPORTS HIS READERS BACK TO THE WILDERNESS WHERE JESUS WAS TESTED.

Imagine that we stand next to Jesus when Satan shows up. We are hungry and Satan reminds Jesus of his Son of God powers and invites him to turn stones into bread. Let's admit we would likely say, "Sounds good to us," Jesus, "We're starving and it's a long way to Panera Bread." But Jesus has different ideas about what it means to be the Son of God and what it means to follow God's son.

We stand next to Jesus when Satan leads him to the pinnacle of the Temple. He tells Jesus that as the Son of God he is immune to dangers and threats life poses to mere mortals. You have special privileges; use them. We like the idea of cruising through life without danger, suffering, or pain. We tell Jesus, "Sounds good to me". But Jesus has different ideas about what it means to be God's son and what it means to follow God's son.

Satan tries again, surely you want to conquer the world for God, worship me, that is to say, let me show you how

to do it; let me show you how to be accepted, how to be popular, how to win friends and influence people. I know how to succeed in this world. We tell Jesus, "Sounds good to us." Jesus, however refuses. He will worship and therefore serve only God. He will not employ the wisdom of the world nor use its ways to achieve his goals.

NOW WE SEE WHY JESUS CALLED PETER "SATAN".

Like Satan, Peter wants Jesus to take the easy way, the path of least resistance. Like Satan Peter wants Jesus to listen to the wisdom of the world. "It's better to be a winner than a loser." Naturally Peter wants to follow a winner, one that will give him glory, power, wealth, comfort. Peter wants to walk a smooth peaceful road, one that takes little effort and involves little or no danger. Peter wants discipleship without hardship. Roses without thorns. It's a "what's in it for me approach" to the Kingdom of God, to being members of God's new family.

JESUS TURNS HIS BACK ON CAESAREA PHILIPPI.

Jesus turns his back on pomp and circumstance, on glory, power, and success. Jesus refuses to listen to the wisdom of the world represented by Rome and its Emperor. He turns his back on violence, force and compulsion. Once again he puts Satan behind him and heads for Jerusalem... and the cross which awaits him there. He embraces sacrificial love as the means of bringing in the Kingdom of God. He embraces that because he is the Son of God, God's anointed agent, and self-sacrificing love is what God and His kingdom is all about.

Jesus' interpretation of God's revelation is the correct one. God's Messiah is a wounded Messiah; this Messiah is not served, but serves. This Messiah is wounded for our transgressions. This Messiah dies for his subjects, because that's what sacrificial love does. And so it follows that being a disciple of Jesus means taking up a cross and following him. When we answer Jesus' question about his identity, we reply by telling him ours.

