

More Than Words
Mark 8:27–38
Sunday, September 12, 2021

I would imagine that, for a lot of you, the events that took place 20 years ago yesterday are still as fresh for *you* as they are for *me*. The images that we saw unfolding live on television. The memories of exactly where we were. The shock and horror and uncertainty and fear of that day. Feelings that, in many ways, are still *visceral* for a lot of us. But what I have discovered recently is that none of this is the case for my children. That shouldn't be surprising, since they weren't even *born* yet, and it wasn't until very recently that they have even developed an awareness of what happened on September 11. For them, it is an event in the history books, much the same way Pearl Harbor was for me when my grandfather talked about it.

One of our kids had to read a novel about September 11 over the summer; a story about a boy trying to escape the World Trade Center when the planes hit. I read it out loud with him each night before bed, and even though it was fictional, there were parts that I couldn't even *get through* without crying. But for *him*, it was just a compelling story. So we've been talking a lot lately about what happened that day, why it happened, and how the world has changed *since* it happened. And one of the most interesting things for me is seeing their astonishment at our descriptions of what life was like *before* September 11.

How air travel has changed. That before September 11, you could essentially walk right off the street into an airport and go directly to a gate with no ticket and minimal security. On your way *through* security, you could bring food and drinks with you from outside, you didn't have to take off your shoes, and a pocketknife would barely get a second glance. That, when you were boarding the plane, they'd let you go into the cockpit and look around. And when you landed,

your family and friends could be right there at the gate waiting for you. That is totally foreign to their experience of air travel. They have never known that world.

Or I told them about how, before September 11, most people didn't have cell phones, and hardly anyone sent text messages. "What did you do? How did you *talk* to each other?" "Well, we called each other, and email usage was just starting to become widespread." And it's not coincidental that we saw a massive surge in technology and cell phone use and texting after September 11. Because when it was all unfolding in New York City, all the phone lines were jammed up, and the only way people could communicate was, if they happened to have a Blackberry, they could send text messages. After that, we started realizing the importance and helpfulness of texting, and our technology caught up with our need. But my kids can't *imagine* that world.

The way we understood and experienced the world changed on that day. And *because* of that new understanding, the way that we *lived* changed. Our *belief* (how we understood the world) changed our *behavior*.

Jesus asks some questions here that get to that same idea. He asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am," to which they reply, "Some people say you are John the Baptist back from the dead. Some people say you are Elijah the prophet who has come back to earth from heaven. Others say that you are one of the other prophets." These are all high assessments of Jesus. They're not dismissing him or writing him off as a nobody. These answers show that the people think very highly of him, that he is in some sense *of God*. But they're not enough. They all fall short of showing a true understanding of who he is and what he is there to do.

So, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” To which Peter replies, “You are the Messiah.” A lot of times, we think of the word *messiah* as simply meaning *savior*, so we need to unpack this a little. The word that Mark uses here in writing this is the Greek word *Christo* or *Christ*. It’s the Greek version of the Hebrew word that Peter would have used, *messiah*. *Christ* and *Messiah* both mean *anointed*. Peter is saying here, “You are the anointed one.” To be *anointed* refers to the inauguration ceremony of a prophet, priest, or king (as described throughout the Old Testament), in which oil was poured on the head of the chosen one as a sign of their consecration into that sacred office.

Thus, *Messiah*, *Christ*, and *anointed* all refer to the same thing: the one chosen by God and inaugurated into the office of prophet, priest, or king.¹ Authors Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that, while there have been *many* prophets, priests, and kings, to refer to Jesus as *the Messiah* means that Peter confesses Jesus to be *the* prophet who speaks for God, *the* priest who reconciles humanity to God and mediates the forgiveness of sin, and *the* king designated by God to represent the kingdom of God’s rule and reign.² And so in calling Jesus *the Messiah*, Peter is confessing him to be the *definitive revelation* of God, the one in whom God acts decisively for human salvation.³ Which is why what happens *next* is both so *surprising* and so *understandable*.

Jesus tells them that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, be *killed*, and after three days rise again. Peter hears that, and he takes Jesus aside and begins to *rebuke* him. Because the *Messiah*, the *definitive revelation of God*, is not *supposed* to suffer or be rejected by the religious leaders or die. That’s not how any of this is supposed to work out.

¹ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, pg. 145.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The Messiah is supposed to come in power and reign in glory, and what Jesus is talking about here is *not that*.

So Peter takes him aside and *rebukes* him. “What are you *doing*? Why are you *saying* these things? Stop *talking* like this!” Other gospels have Peter saying, “I will *never* let that happen to you!” It’s not just that Peter cares about Jesus and doesn’t want to see him suffer and die. It’s that what Jesus is saying completely shatters their understanding of what the Messiah would *be* and *do*. It doesn’t *fit* with the way that Peter and the other disciples understand God and their faith.

And what Jesus *says* to that is, “Get behind me, Satan!” That word *Satan*, we obviously have a lot of associations with, but the Hebrew word *satan* more generally means, “adversary,” or, “one who opposes God’s purposes.” And when Jesus says, “Get behind me,” that is the same phrase he uses elsewhere to say, “Follow me,” literally *get behind me*. Jesus is reminding Peter of his place as a disciple, saying, “You need to get back behind me and follow me, because you are opposing God’s purposes here. You’re trying to *lead me* instead of being led *by me*. You are setting your mind not on *divine* things but on *human* things. You’re focusing on what *you* want rather than what *God* wants.”

And then Jesus takes it a step further. He says, “What it *means* to follow me is to deny yourself and take up your cross. 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 (the good news of the kingdom of God), they will *save* their life.” If we look at all of this as a whole, Jesus is saying that if the disciples believe him to be the Messiah, the definitive revelation of God, then their *actions* and the way they *live* have to change. They have to set their minds on *divine* things rather than *human* things. They

have to *follow him*, deny themselves, and take up their own cross. They have to *lose their lives*; not just *die*, but give up their lives, *let go* of their lives, let go of *control* over their lives. Because *that* is how they will find *real life* in *him*.

But this isn't just for those disciples. What Jesus says to *them* asks questions of *us*. Who do *you* say that Jesus is? There are *all kinds* of ways to answer that question. Some people believe that Jesus was simply a good moral teacher, a human being who had been called by God to teach us how to live a good life and love one another. Muslims believe that Jesus existed but say that he was a prophet; someone who spoke on behalf of God and pointed people to God. All of these are high assessments of Jesus; they don't dismiss him or write him off as a nobody. They show that the people think very highly of him, that he is in some sense *of God*. But they're not enough. They don't fully capture who Jesus is and what he came to do.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the definitive revelation of God, the *Son* of God, the *Word* of God made flesh, *God with us* in flesh and blood. We believe that he lived, died, and rose from the dead to show us God's great love for us so that we could be at one with God and with each other now and forever. We believe that *Jesus is God*.

And if we *believe* that, then that has to shape the way in which we live. We have to get behind him and follow him, not trying to *lead* him, but being led *by* him. We have to deny *ourselves*, our own impulses and desires and prejudices and preferences. We have to set our minds not on *human* things but on *divine* things; not on what *we* want but on what *God* wants. We have to let go of our lives, over the desire for control over our lives, over other people and the world around

us. We have to say, as Jesus did, “Not *my* will, but *your* will be done.” We have to die to ourselves because that is how we find new life, *real life* in Christ.

Our *belief* about who Jesus is has to change our *behavior*. It has to change the way we use our time and our money and our gifts and abilities. It has to change how we treat one another, how we *speak* to one another. It has to change how we respond when someone hurts us; our willingness to *forgive* one another. It has to make us more patient, kind, loving, generous, trustworthy, hopeful people. It doesn’t just change our *worldview* or how we *think*, it changes how we *live* and how we *act*. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that Christianity is not just something to be *believed* or *understood* but something to be *existed in*.

Who do you say that Jesus is, and how does your answer to that question affect the way you live? How does the way you *live* and *act* support that claim?

When I think back to twenty years ago, there is one more way that our world was changed by what happened. I remember the *traffic* in Atlanta, where I was living at the time. If you’ve never driven there, traffic in Atlanta is like 76 going into Philadelphia, spread out over five lanes going each direction, all day, every day. It is every man for himself. It’s a nightmare. But in the days following September 11, I remember merging onto the beltway that goes around Atlanta, where if you’re not going 90, you’re getting passed, and people were slowing down and waving me in. I remember a kindness and a patience and a generosity that I hadn’t experienced before. (We can’t ignore the fact that our brothers and sisters of Middle Eastern descent, a lot of them had a very *different* experience in those days and months that followed.) I remember seeing Republican and Democratic members of Congress *singing* together on the Capitol steps. I remember seeing people in Europe and Asia and Africa lighting candles and crying for people

they had never met in places they had maybe never been, half a world away. I remember people *coming together* in compassion and empathy and love. We had a sense of the greater good.

That seems like a *lifetime* ago, doesn't it? When you think about where we have gone since then, where we are *right now*, it almost doesn't even seem *possible* anymore. We have started to believe *other* things about ourselves and about each other, and *those* beliefs have shaped the way we treat one another and relate to each another. Our world is not only so different from the way it was on September 10th, it is so different from the way it was on September 12th. We seem to have *lost* that sense of the greater good and a sense of goodwill toward one another. We've lost that patience and compassion and empathy and love that felt so necessary at the time. And it obviously won't take another catastrophe to bring us back together, because we've been *living* in one for the past year and a half, and it's worse than ever. So how do we change this?

Five hundred years before Jesus, there was a Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu (pronounced *loud-za*) who said,

“If there is to be peace in the world,
 there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
 there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
 there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
 there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
 there must be peace in the heart.”

I know that I cannot change the state of our country or the state of our world. But I can open *myself* up to *being* changed. And I can at least *encourage* you to do the same by remembering that if we confess Jesus to be the Messiah, the definitive revelation of God, then he calls us to recognize that this world and this life is not about *me* and what *I* want. I have to get behind him

and follow him, not trying to *lead* him or control others, but to be led *by* him. I have to deny *myself*, my own impulses and desires and prejudices and preferences. I have to set my mind not on *human* things but on *divine* things; not on what *I* want but on what *God* wants. I have to let go of my life, over the desire for control over my life. And I have to trust that if I live in ways that are patient and kind and loving and generous and trustworthy and hopeful, in ways that seek not to tear others down but to build them up, then I will be following Christ on the way that leads to life. Not just for *me* but for *all of us*. Will we allow our belief in Christ to make *that* kind of difference in our lives?