

## *Who Are You, Jesus?*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (13Sept), 2009.*

Text: Mark 8:29

“He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

Jesus’ question deserves our attention. There are many questions we ask in life—some significant, most not: What time is it? Will you marry me? Will you please leave? Does this hurt? Don’t you think it’s time we saw a lawyer? I wonder how much it costs? Is this all there is? Want to order a pizza? Should I quit this job? Should we send her to school today? How do you get to 5<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup>? Should I buy a Blackberry or an iPod? Some questions we take in stride and move on to what is next. Others we may take a long time considering.

On the road to Caesarea Philippi their talk had been like many of Jesus’ conversations with the twelve. He told parables and stories, some probably funny. They discussed what had happened in the last town. But on this day, he changed the subject—suddenly—asking, “*Who do people say that I am?*” After their various answers, he asked, “*But who do you say I am?*”<sup>1</sup> For these twelve, this was a significant moment in their relationship. Are we asked the same question by Jesus?

The conversation on the road turns the plot of Mark. The moment the disciples finally verbalized what they and others had been thinking about Jesus shifts readers to a stunning conclusion of the story of Jesus. Having recognized that he was the Messiah, they were ready for what came next. From this point the cross and resurrection dominate the gospel story. Everything from that moment leads to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, to the empty tomb. No question Mark believed that being the Messiah led Jesus to the cross. But more, being a disciple of Jesus also leads disciples to our own crosses.<sup>2</sup>

I haven’t talked publicly much about this. Though my memory may have been clouded by anesthesia, here is what I remember. Last January I was in Washington and had emergency abdominal surgery. It related to an old hiatal hernia and my stomach. I was well treated at Bethesda as admirals are and things seemed to go well. They sent me home quickly, as hospitals do nowadays. I did well for about a week but seemed quite weak and was losing weight faster than seemed healthy. About one week out of Bethesda, I fell at home and this got my attention. I

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:27,29.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:34.

decided I'd call Dr. Meanor for an appointment. She had heard the news about my surgery and had called for me to come tell her my sea stories anyway. Why I didn't go straight to the emergency room immediately is a good question. But I didn't. It took me yet another day to get to see her. She took one look at me and said, "You're going to the hospital this instant—you are anemic, as white as a sheet." Because of a series of miscues, most for which I blame myself, an endoscope could not be scheduled until 18 hours after my admission. That night at Mountainside I was quite weak. Late I asked for help to get to the bathroom. After a few moments I found myself waking from a moment of lapsed consciousness. I was still upright and pulled the cord on the wall for help. The aide returned and was scolding me. I stopped her and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you don't understand, I'm in real trouble. Call a doctor." I guess she could see and immediately she had help for me. I was surrounded by aides and RNs and who knows whom. All were frantically trying to get me onto the bed. They found my blood pressure had tanked and everything got real chaotic. I guess they coded me, given the number of people surrounding me and the fuss they were making. I had at that instant the odd experience as if I were looking down on a scene in a movie or television, except that I was the one they were trying to revive on the bed below. A man rushed into the room and suddenly the chaos abated. He took charge and began to talk with me asking for permission to do this and that. In exasperation, I told him to get a move on it. My back hurt and I was dying for a drink of water. They rolled me down to ICU, and he began to install a larger port into my groin to get fluid into me. I felt every stitch he made. It seemed like forever. I was very uncomfortable, but he and I kept talking the whole time.

The next thing I knew I was in the endoscopy suite and though it was 1:30am, Dr. Tobia my gastroenterologist was there with his crew. I had never been so glad to see a familiar face in my life. In a short time he found I had a small spot in my stomach lining that had been bleeding and cauterized it with the endoscope. I didn't wake up to learn about this until about 5:00am, that odd hour Dr. Meanor makes her rounds. She turned the light on in my ICU room and put a cold stethoscope onto my chest and announced that I must be on extremely good terms with the Lord. "You were very sick last night and you had an extremely close call. But I think you will be fine now. God must have a reason for you to go on." I almost told her, "That's my line," but didn't. A little later, Dr. Tobia came in and explained what he discovered and what he had done. He added a cautionary caveat that we would have to wait several days to see if the bleeding was really stopped, if the cauterization worked. Then every person who had been with me the previous night, as their shifts changed and were going home, came to see me in the daylight. They all had the biggest smiles on their faces, like they had witnessed a miracle. I vaguely remembered them all from the night before, especially the Haitian doctor who brought the order out of chaos. He couldn't get over the fact that he and I talked all through his ministrations. They had earned their pay that night and there is nothing like raising the dead to make a person feel like he or she has really accomplished something worthwhile!

Is there a reason my life was spared? Another important question. I have spent the months since that night considering this question. Dr. Johnson said of hearing bullets whiz over your head in a war, “it wonderfully focuses the mind.” Such an experience does change your perspective. Frankly I would not want to go through the incident again. Once is enough. I got the point. After that night, I must tell you: There are only a few *truly important* questions in life and there is much stuff that consumes the rest of our time and energy. Recently someone complained to me, “I’m too busy!” “But what have you accomplished?” I asked. Busy-ness is not a guarantee that we are doing anything worthwhile. That is why I like Jesus’ straightforward question, “*But who do you say that I am?*” I had always focused on Peter’s answer, but today I focus on the immediacy of his question. As if looking at Peter and now looking at me, he wants to know who I think he is and how I will live with that knowledge that he is my messiah.

One thing I took away from that evening experience in Mountainside: I do not want to *play at church* anymore. I don’t want to sell more people on being members so we can build a stronger institution. I want to make disciples for Jesus and train them to live for him. There is much that consumes us but we often miss the main point. “*Who is Jesus?*” and “*What are we going to do about it?*” I don’t need to list all the things we do in church to avoid those questions. You can all fill up pages of examples of how busy we are but how it is mostly motion without mission.

The imperative, compelling nature of Jesus’ question arrests me. *Who do you say that I am?* Do we ask it often enough? With feeling and conviction? Does our work as a church compel the question and seek an answer to it? Or are we more concerned with lesser questions? Do our classes, sermons, meetings, budgets, music ask the important question of those seeking an answer? Do we ask it with urgency, because after my experience, I think it is an urgent and important question. It cuts through the superficiality that characterizes so much of our busy-ness.

*Just who are you, Jesus?* Why does the question and the answer so frighten us? Is it because we know the answer we give will compel change in us? *Just who are you, Jesus?* This is my question. No matter what else you take away this morning, I hope you will ask it of yourself as you leave, first thing tomorrow morning, later in the week. *Just who are you, Jesus?* And that you will return to this congregation next week seeking an answer for him and for yourself.

End

Who are you Jesus.DOC