

Who is Jesus? By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 15090913
James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38
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In the last few weeks, we have heard about the first half of Jesus' ministry according to the Gospel of Mark. We have heard of his feeding of five thousand people, of his healing others, including women and non-Jews, of his contending with pharisees and other leaders of the church, and of his walking on water and calming a storm. All of this has taken place up in the north, in Galilee, and even in the Phoenician region of Tyre and Sidon.

Today, we find Jesus and his disciples in the far north of Israel, where the present-day nations of Israel, Syria, and Lebanon come together, half-way up Mt. Hermon. At this point, we begin the second half of Jesus' ministry. There are sixteen chapters in Mark. Today's story appears in Chapter Eight of Mark. From here on, we find Jesus heading toward Jerusalem and his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and the empty tomb.

Let's stop to take a look at the scenery. We are in the beautiful villages of Caesarea Philippi. This is where the Jordan River begins its long journey to the Lake of Galilee and into the Dead Sea. The temperature is cool, the grass and foliage are a lush green. Mt. Hermon, at 9,230 ft., towers above and the valley stretches out below. Water gushes out of the ground from springs fed by the melting snows of the mountain peak above. Caesarea Philippi is the source of the river that gives life to the plants, animals, and people of the region.

It is here that Jesus asked his disciples who he was. First, he asked, "Who do people say that I am?"

They answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."¹ These were the popular opinions— the things that others were saying about who Jesus was. These answers were founded in the hopes of the people who wanted to see Israel returned to the glory days of the past. Jews were still waiting for the return of the prophet Elijah. John the Baptist, a popular figure, had been killed by King Herod just a few months before.

Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Who is Jesus? If we ask that question, we will get many different answers. For some, Jesus is a miracle performer who does miraculous healing. For others, Jesus is the ticket to heaven. For some, Jesus blesses worldly wealth and success. For many, he is someone in whom to hide and be protected. For others, he is a close friend and guide.

Mark Moore said Jesus was a redneck. Here's why. He didn't wash his hands before he ate. He let women support him financially. He called one woman a dog and asked another to get him a drink. He was from a small rural town and had at least six half-brothers and sisters. His mother was only about fifteen years old when she had him. His best friends were fishing buddies. He showed up late for the funeral of one of his best friends. He never went to college and probably didn't graduate from high school. And, he was born in a barn.²

¹Mark 8:28

²"Why Rednecks Can Relate to Jesus", by Mark Moore in "Door", July/August, quoted by Martin Marty in *Context*, Sept. 15, 1996

Who is Jesus for you?

For Peter and the others, the word Messiah connoted a figure like King David, who would lead the nation to a new greatness. David was God's anointed. The prophet Samuel had poured oil over David, anointing him.³ David became a great military leader, uniting the tribes together into a nation rivaling the powers of Egypt and Persia.

Peter got the answer right, in calling Jesus Messiah, or the Christ, or the anointed one. But then, Jesus had to teach them what being God's Messiah really meant. The disciples were quite slow in understanding who Jesus was. First, Jesus told the disciples to be quiet about him. They weren't to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Next, he told them that *this* Messiah was to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed and after three days, rise again.

Peter didn't like to hear that. That wasn't the kind of Messiah he wanted to follow. He rebuked Jesus: "You can't put yourself in that kind of a position."

For that, Jesus called Peter "Satan," meaning an obstructor. We can't let human ways get in the way of divine ways. Following divine ways often means standing up to power and wealth, the way Crystal Lee Sutton did. She was depicted by Sally Field in the movie *Norma Rae* who struggled against the poor working conditions of textile mill workers.

Jesus was God's anointed, ushering in the Kingdom of God, a kingdom where all people have value and worth, a kingdom where people love their neighbors and their enemies, and a kingdom where all can find justice and a fair deal.

Power structures don't take kindly to that sort of thing. It sounds too much like socialism, and by golly, we can't have that, now, can we? Some undocumented foreigner might get medical treatment, and that can't happen. What is so sad for me is that most of the tea party and town meeting screamers probably consider themselves good Christians. Why do people who know the least know it the loudest? Do they know that Jesus said, "The . . . Lord . . . has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁴

Who is Jesus?

For me, Jesus is the savior of the world, and I follow him. For, if everyone followed the ways he taught, and followed his example of compassion, there would be no reason for fear or war. There would be no hunger. There would be no one left without health care.

If everyone followed Jesus, God's kingdom would truly have come on earth as it is in heaven, and that is what we pray for every week as we pray the Lord's Prayer.

At Caesarea Philippi, the springs from the melting snows of Mt. Hermon flow south, becoming the Jordan River that gives life to all in its path. Jesus, God's anointed one, gives life to all in his path.

Open your hearts and let him give his life to you.

³1 Samuel 16:13

⁴Luke 4:18-19