

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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What Do You Say?

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Polls

A comedian that I listen to from time to time opened a special that he taped right before a major presidential election (I'll leave out the year to avoid any controversy) with a poll. He reported that a recent survey from Public Policy Polling revealed that 13% of voters that year would rather see a giant meteor crash into the earth and end civilization as we now it than see either party's candidate in the White House. His point in the joke was that 13% is not a small number. That's a lot of people who looked at their choices and said "Yeah, let's wrap it up here."

My point is that 13% of respondents didn't come up with that on their own. You can just imagine the pollsters in their offices coming up with the questions they're going to ask.

"Democrat...Republican...I feel like we need one more choice...Giant Meteor! Let's go with that!"

In reality, we poll just about everything we do as a society, don't we? There are polls for what we watch on television. There are polls for what we're eating. There was even a poll about what snack food best represented respondent's emotional state at the moment...

We take all these polls because we've discovered that if you can figure out what people think, you can influence their behavior. You can make the products, run the candidate, provide the snack food, that will best serve your interests.

In our text this morning, Jesus is running his own polling, but of course he takes a different spin on it.

What's the word?

Jesus asks the disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The phrase “Son of Man” here is a title that Jesus uses for himself, one that comes straight from the book of Daniel. Interesting here that he starts with the title, but we’ll come back to that in a moment.

The disciples offer up the top three answers of the day.

First, they say John the Baptist. John has come up a lot in our texts together, hasn’t he? Remember that John was just recently killed for speaking truth to power, specifically political power. John was the kind of prophet that ruffled the feathers of the political establishment of his day. So to compare Jesus to John would be to say that perhaps the Son of Man is another political rabble rouser, that he’s going to shake up the political institutions of the day, and give people what they want in their leaders. That’s at least the first survey result that comes back.

Then they say perhaps he is Elijah. Elijah is without question the greatest prophet in all of Israel’s history. Elijahs’ biggest story, his greatest feat, was when he challenged the prophets of Baal to a show down. They built altars, and whoever could get their God to call down fire and consume the offering without lighting a match would be the winner. Elijah flexes on this pretty hard too, he douses his altar with enough water that there’s a moat around it. Still, God shows up and brings fire from heaven, and the God of Israel wins of the prophets of Baal.

So maybe to suggest that the Son of Man is like Elijah means that he will restore their religion to supremacy. This would certainly be the view the Pharisees held, that's what they pictured from the Messiah. They weren't so sure that Jesus was it, but still. They assumed the Messiah would end the decline of their religion, and put them back on top. Not a bad survey result.

Then lastly they come up with this generic "Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The prophet, Jeremiah included, were all about teaching the people of Israel how to behave to make sure they get right with God. So to call Jesus just a generic "one of the prophets" was to say "The Son of Man is a great moral teacher." He's going to show us what we need to do to get on the straight and narrow. Well, actually that answer usually looks like "He's going to show the people we disagree with what to do to get on the straight and narrow..." But still. This is to say that they viewed the Son of Man as a great moral teacher.

What I find interesting about these results that come back is that these are essentially the same answers that are out there today, aren't they? A lot of folks still view Jesus as a political figure. Both parties kind of wrestle with bringing Jesus into their policies, rather than bringing their policies to Jesus. It's easy to win votes after all if people think Jesus is on your side. Some folks still view Jesus as the religious triumph. In the age of declining membership, having Jesus in your camp means that maybe your religion can beat up all the other religions. Maybe you can be proved right in the face of everybody else being wrong. And of course, a lot of folks still view Jesus as a great moral teacher. Though it's popular, I'm not sure how serious everyone is about it. If Jesus is viewed by so many as a

great moral teacher, I wonder why we have so much trouble loving our enemies and taking care of the least of these.

All told, the answers to this poll are still very much alive today. There are however a few problems with this:

Incomplete.

First, notice that all people seem to be able to do is compare Jesus to somebody else. To state the obvious, Jesus is none of the people he is compared to. Jesus is not John the Baptist. He is not Elijah. Jesus is not Jeremiah. The only thing it seems that people can do is to look at someone else, and say that Jesus is like them. Which, sometimes, comparison can be helpful. But I've often found that it leaves you rather incomplete.

Which leads to the second issue with all of these answers...none of them is complete within itself. If Jesus were a political figure alone, what a let down that would be. If Jesus were all about making a particular denomination or religion supreme, what would we do once he accomplished that? If Jesus were just a great moral teacher, what point would there be in worshipping him? No, Jesus is very much all three of these things together, and much more. So, Jesus keeps polling.

The important question:

Jesus turns to these disciples and asks "Who do *you* say that I am?" Can I be honest with you church? I think this is the most important question we can face down in the life of faith.

In this moment, Jesus is done with public opinion surveys. He doesn't want to know what the public thinks of him. Jesus

doesn't want to know what answer will get you a perfect score on the theological exam. Jesus isn't interested in how everyone else is defining him. He wants to know what his friends say about him. Notice here that it's not "Son of Man" anymore. He's not using the title. Instead, he just comes out with it. Who do you say that I am?

He wants these 12 disciples, teenagers, really, to tell him what *they* think of Jesus. What have they experienced on this journey so far? What has Jesus meant to them along the way? What experiences of Jesus have shaped them? What do they have to say about their master, mentor, and friend?

Peter answers.

We have discussed Peter a lot in sermons recently. Peter is the very definition of "Ready? Fire! Aim." He's one of those people who seems to be hearing what he's saying for the first time right along with the rest of us. So, I can imagine the disciples at this point recoiling as Peter draws his breath to speak... "Oh no...how's he going to mess this up?"

Peter says "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Can you imagine the shock on the disciple's faces at this point? I'll even bet there was a bit of shock on Jesus' face, he's been around Peter for a while now too.

"Did...did Peter just get one right?"

Yeah, he did! Peter, when asked who Jesus was to him, said that he was the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who was going to set the Kingdom right. He is the Son of the Living God.

As Jesus is praising Peter, he has some interesting things to say. First, he is sure to cite his sources. This didn't come from flesh and blood, they can't show you this. Peter is not just reciting the Sunday School answer here, if only because Sunday School didn't exist yet. This isn't something that someone taught him. He's not parroting back information. He's not just putting down the answer that he has seen someone else give. Apparently, no one else had this answer either...all the poll results were incomplete, remember.

No this is isn't an answer that comes from people according to Jesus. This is an answer that comes from God. God alone gave Peter the answer. Somehow, in this moment, when faced with the question of who Jesus is, Peter is able to quiet his mind and heart enough to hear from God. "Let me tell you about my boy!"

In fact, I don't think it's just this moment. I think that over the years of travel, while watching miracles and mysteries and parables and sitting around campfires, God has been nudging Peter. Apparently he's been paying attention to the nudges too. He's been building it like a good detective case, seeing all of these little experiences along the way like clues. And when the moment is right, when the question is right in front of him, he knows the answer. "He's the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

In fact, Peter is so right about this, that's how Jesus gives him his nickname. Peter, or *Petras* in the Greek, is the word for Rock. "Simon, son of Jonah! You're going to be called Rocky from here on out!" In fact, Jesus says that this answer is so solid, he can build a whole church around it.

But it's a secret.

Interesting then that the next thing Jesus says is “don’t tell anyone.” This seems strange in our age of polling, doesn’t it? Usually when you get the right answer, usually when the poll tells you what you want it to tell you, you start a marketing campaign. You get billboards and TikTok ads and Super Bowl commercials. You get the word out. Not here. Jesus says “Don’t tell a soul.”

Why?

I think it’s because this is something that people have to find out for themselves, from God. You cannot repeat the poll results and answer this question. You cannot repeat Sunday School facts and answer this question. You cannot memorize enough scripture to answer this question. To answer this question, you have to do what Peter did.

You have to have experiences with Jesus. You have to put yourself in the places where Jesus is. You have to see Jesus acting in your life. You have to behold some miracles with wonder. You have to hear him challenge your world view. You have to realize that most of the time, like Peter, when we’re giving an answer it’s the wrong one. And you have to see the grace and forgiveness that comes from Jesus every time we do.

Only then, only when you’ve had your own experience with Jesus can you answer the question when he asks you “Who do you say that I am?”

Who do you say that he is?

We have to answer this for ourselves. There are a lot of bad influencers out there on this too.

In my very favorite show of all time, *The West Wing*, there's this line that has always stuck with me. The President in the show is spending too much time listening to polls to tell him where to go. His advisor says to him "You are like the king who saw his people march past the palace and said 'There go my people, I ought to see where they're going so that I can lead them!'"

We can't let the polling of our day tell us what to do, especially the polling around Jesus. Do not let the politicians define Jesus for you, they're bad at it. Do not let a particular religious tradition define Jesus for you. Do not reduce Jesus to just some moral guide. Do not let the answers from your youth stagnate and never change, holding on to a past vision of Jesus that may not have been right in the first place. (No matter how good your youth pastor used to be...)

Instead, let God answer the question for you. Inventory your experiences with God. I mean, what is God up to in your life right now? Where have you seen God working? Where are the stories in your life that have Jesus' finger prints all over them? What are the stories that could only have come together with God's hand in them, the "No one is going to believe this" kind of stories?

Truth be told, every now and again in my job someone will come by my office and tell me stories like that. And I *love* it every single time. I wish I could spend my whole day hearing those stories of what God is doing in your lives. Because, when we do that, we're getting closer to being able to answer the

question, aren't we? Who do you say that he is? He's the one who's been doing all this for me my whole life long.

Listen

If the answer to the question is something that flesh and blood cannot give us, then maybe we ought to spend more time listening. This is not easy! A couple of times a week I try to come in here to the sanctuary and pray in silence. Not the kind of prayers where I'm asking for things, there's room for that later. Rather, the kind of prayer I'm after is where I'm able to still my heart and mind and just hear what God has to say to me. This kind of prayer is uncomfortable and difficult, so we often try to avoid it. Not only that, but we fill our lives with so much noise that we'll never have to face the uncomfortable silence with God.

But, it's in that silence that God often speaks. It's in that silence that Jesus shows us who he is. It's in that silence that Jesus speaks over us. It's in that silence that Jesus tells us who we are too. And it's in that silence that Jesus tells us what he's calling us to next.

Get on the move!

There's this YouTube series I love called DIRT. Truth be told, I don't know why it's called that. The host travels around the world, and each episode is a different country or place he visits. As he tours around, he speaks with locals and hears the stories of how they became farmers, or fishers, or hunters, sometimes engaging in practices that go back for generations. At every stop, these locals give him an ingredient, and at the end he collects them all for a feast and they share it together.

In a lot of ways, this is how I see what our calling is. We too can get out there in the world we live in, and maybe even push ourselves to go to places we've never imagined. We too can meet with people, locals really, and get to hear their story. We can collect these stories of what God is doing in people's lives as ingredients along the way of our travels. And then we come back together to feast on what God is showing us through it all.

Maybe, just maybe, when we come back, we'll have our own answer.

Who do you say that Jesus is?

May you...

May you set aside public polling. It's not that helpful anyway. May you not be content to use anyone else's answer to who Jesus is. May you see him as bigger than a political figure, a religious icon, or a moral teacher.

But instead, may you have an experience with Christ this week. May you see him at work in your life, revealing himself to you. And may you know in your heart your own answer to the question. May you know who he is.



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