

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

September 15, 2024

**THE GOOD NEWS:**  
**Truth and Lies**

Dr. Jo Forrest



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The good news of Mark's gospel takes shape at unexpected places and in startling ways for Jesus' followers.

I'd mentioned last week that towns and states and bodies of water in Mark's gospel are more than GPS coordinates. The names convey meaning about theology, power, and politics. Today's story is right in the middle, almost exactly halfway through the gospel and at a geographic crossroads.

Up until now, Jesus and his followers seemed to traverse the holy land, hoofing it from one town to another and sailing across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus builds a reputation by overcoming the forces of religion, politics, bodily ailments, and hunger.

His followers have left whatever safety they might have enjoyed on their home turf as they head towards a city in the north, an outpost for differing nationalities over the centuries who worshiped all sorts of pagan gods.

They approach a temple built by Herod the Great, dedicated to Rome and the Emperor Augustus, the first Emperor of the Roman Empire — and a man, please note, who added to his title the phrase, "Son of the Divine."

Jesus' entourage skirts around the city and attracts curiosity seekers. The disciples must sense tension — what's Jesus going to do in this place that proclaims Caesar as god?

Imagine yourself as either one of the disciples or among the crowd.

*Dear God,*

*Like the disciples we find ourselves at crossroads all the time.*

*We feel the tug of lies masquerading as truth.*

*We hear claims of small gods who seek our loyalty.*

*And we know the stories of Jesus' divine power to heal.*

*Silence any of the noise around us.*

*Give us the naivete to hear it as if for the first time.*

*Give us the courage to accept the truth it calls us to live, today.*

*Amen.*

### **Mark 8:27-38**

<sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" <sup>28</sup> And they answer him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

<sup>29</sup> He asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers him, "You are the Messiah."

<sup>30</sup> And Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup> Then he begins to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.

<sup>32</sup> Jesus says all this quite openly. And Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebukes Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus calls the crowd with his disciples and says to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For 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, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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Have you ever played *two truths and a lie*? It’s a common ice-breaker game. Just as the name implies, you share three things about yourself. Two true statements to describe your past, personality, or skills, or such that are true, and one falsehood.

You invite the other person to wade between the truths and the lie. The game intends to ease conversation, so you connect with one another. The fun comes when you disguise a truth as a lie or embed a truth within your lie.

I recall playing this game at a work-related cocktail reception in Boston, long ago, while I was quietly and fearfully considering ministry. Most of my colleagues were east coast, ivy-league and I was the foreigner from the Midwest.

Over a glass of wine, these were my two ice-breaker truths and one lie:

I know how to can tomato juice, whole tomatoes, and tomato sauce.

I study theology.

I love to run with my dog along the lake front in Chicago.

A few colleagues knew I'd brave Boston's cold to run along the Charles River, but wondered if I had a dog. Truth or lie? Either way, we could talk about pets, exercise, or travel.

Much to my mom's dismay, after an entire childhood of peeling and cooking tomatoes and working in a hot kitchen during humid August days, without air conditioning, I no longer really know how to get a basket of fresh tomatoes safely into sterilized Mason jars. Even though a lie, I shared a truth about my values and created an opening to talk about the farm, my mom, and cooking.

Since religion and politics were taboo office topics, none guessed theology as a truth. Notice I said "theology" in my statement and avoided admitting to them and myself this scary path of ministry. It was a half-truth at best. If memory



serves, some people excused themselves to fetch another drink.

Let's imagine Jesus engages his disciples with a version of this game.

In the first century, the community's perception rather than a person's self-description defined a person's identity and vocation. Since other people literally told you who you were and what you could become, Jesus' questions become a vital measure to lay bare any misconceptions before he continues his ministry.

Jesus breaks the ice by beginning with a safer query of the infamous "they," the anonymous group of "they" you can hid behind. He asks to no one in particular, from all the accumulated the hearsay on these roads "Who do *they* say that I am?"

It's a low risk question. As Jesus' disciples mill about, they offer ideas.

They shout out *other* people confuse him as some version of the late John the Baptist, killed shortly after Jesus began his ministry. Others think he is the long-awaited Elijah, or another prophet.

Truths or lies?

Jesus sharpens the question with “who do you,” putting each one of them on the spot, “say that I am?” It’s not sufficient to rely on other people’s answers.

At some point, everyone must decide for themselves who Jesus is. Faith must become personal. Intimate. Trusting with our lives.

From what they witnessed, his long-time followers could list healer, miracle worker, pastor, teacher, rebel, and so forth. All truths but not enough. Maybe they begin to realize how limited their understanding is. Maybe he allows for an awkward silence.

Peter speaks. (God love Peter for his bravery!) He says, “the Messiah.”

For centuries the Israelite people prayed and waited for a messiah. In this single word Peter recognizes Jesus as “the anointed one,” the promised deliverer, and ordained by God to save God’s people.

Never let time soften that subversive confession.

Remember, they’re walking toward Caesarea Philippi, toward the temple dedicated to Augustus, who identifies himself as “the son of the divine”, and to his imperial stronghold, which he built by oppressing, enslaving, and controlling the Jewish people.

The contrast is vivid: against Caesar, Peter sees Jesus as the promised Messiah. He believes as they walk toward that profane, repugnant temple — they will become conquerors.

Peter is partly right — and mostly wrong. Peter watched Jesus heal the underdogs and heard the plans to turn upside down the power structures.

Peter's dream of a success story unfolds with glory possible only from a military victory. This brings heated arguments. Notice Jesus does not cast Peter aside, only behind him. He keeps this man close, so he continues to witness.

Later Peter will see Jesus enter Jerusalem on a donkey, not on a warhorse. Peter will understand what it means to liberate and not dominate; restore and not destroy.

At that moment Peter imagines Jesus as a vicious lion to confront Caesar with superior force whereas Jesus is more like the lion, Aslan, of *the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who puts his power towards the good of others, who suffers humiliation and death, for the sake of others.

Jesus overthrows violence with a more subversive and enduring form of resistance by opening his hand with love, not closing it into a fist, and calls all his followers to do the same.

No one wants to believe him.

Two more times Jesus makes the exact same prediction. Jesus will profess he is the son of man. He will suffer, die, and rise. Even after three times, his disciples run from the cross and doubt the women on Easter.

It's easier to believe a messiah will come – a future messiah makes no demands. A messiah right in your face calls you to attend to your life right here and now.

This is when the crisis of faith for Peter becomes our crisis of faith today. What kind of a messiah will we give our lives to?

How willing are we to look past the billboards of culture that promise easy fixes without relinquishing any trappings of our success? How willing are we to casually ignore blatant lies for the sake of just getting along? Or, just so long as it's not my family that's targeted and hurt.

Jesus' truth requires letting go of whatever others think we need to be, letting go of what the world says about us, and him, and others. His truth requires seeing how flimsy the world's promises are and losing ourselves for his sake.

St. Augustine was the first to describe sin as a life "curved inward on oneself" and the saving grace of the cross that calls us to new life. It's a helpful image for conceiving what Jesus is getting at when he speaks of "losing" and "saving" our lives.

What's the "for-the-sake-of" that animates us? Are we living for ourselves, trying to save ourselves? Then we're curved inward, like a closed fist, afraid of losing what we think we have or fighting for more. Or, are we living for each other, for the neighborhood, or someone else's neighborhood, for the good news of God's love and mercy? Then we're curved outward, with an open, loving hand.

This is the weighty moment when our gospel questions us, as Jesus questions Peter, "Are you living for human things or for divine things?"

A friend from England stayed with us for several days last week. (Sometimes it takes an outsider to startle us to notice how immune we've become.) While watching the nightly news he became visibly shaken by the political commercials. "One ad directly denies the truth of the other. How do you know what to believe? Is anyone telling the truth?"

The south hills are in many ways a Caesarea Philippi with billboards and lawn signs, with brands, and temptations to claim our attention, our resources, our devotion. Despite the presumed sophistication we think we've achieved, we cannot underestimate the damage done when lies masquerade as truth and the hard work required to reclaim our fidelity to Jesus' good news.

Who we think Jesus is will determine how much we let these messages sway towards the worldly trappings of power or

success. Like the disciples, we need to hear again and again his truth, in this faith community. We need his church, we need each one of us so together we proclaim the paradoxical good news of the cross, the grave, and the empty tomb.

Our messiah gives us a truth that stands the test of time.

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