



First United Church of Oak Park

Who Do People Say That I Am?

Mark 8: 27-33

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February 28, 2021

Even early on in Jesus' ministry, he was doing amazing things. Incredible things that defied explanation and that gave people hope in a time when hope was scarce. Jesus was feeding thousands of people at a time when the fear was that there wasn't enough to go around. Jesus was freeing those who were held in the grip of demonic spiritual powers at a time when the fear was that once a person was corrupted they could never be delivered. Jesus was comforting the sick, restoring them to health, bringing them back from death's door at a time when the fear was that the sick were beyond help. Jesus was doing amazing things, incredible things that gave people hope in a time when hope was scarce.

As you might imagine, he had amassed quite a following. There were the 12 disciples, yes — Simon who was called Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Thaddeus, and Judas Iscariot. But there were also great crowds of others who were also followers of Jesus.

And as this great crowd of followers traveled with Jesus, Jesus asked a question — who do people say that I am? This was easy. They could answer that right away because there had been a great deal of conversation and speculation about who this person was. Who was this man who could do these amazing, incredible things? Some said he was John the Baptist, others said he was Elijah, others said he was one of the great prophets of yore.

Wait, people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist? It makes sense, they were cousins, after all — perhaps it was simple family resemblance? No, it's not that simple. Because on this day, when Jesus asked this crowd who do people say that I am, by that time John the Baptist was already dead. He had been executed by the king. Quite publicly so, in fact: He made an example of John, made sure everyone knew why he was being put to death. Everyone knew John the Baptist was dead.

So when people are saying — he must be John the Baptist — they are in fact saying he must be John the Baptist come back from the dead. Someone who can do these incredible things, inspire hope when hope was scarce; it must be someone who is back from the dead.

In fact, all their other guesses are this same sort. People imagine perhaps Jesus is Elijah, having returned to the world from the far shores of heaven on his flaming chariot. Others imagine Jesus must be one of the great prophets — Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel — risen from their graves and alive again. Every single guess that the crowd makes is more or less the same. The crowd all agree that only a person who had come back from the dead could do such amazing things. Jesus must be someone who has come back from the dead.

And in a way, they're right. Because Jesus tells them that he, too, would walk that same path. Jesus tells them all quite openly that he would walk down into the very valley of the shadow of death, be swallowed up for a time, and then walk back up into life again. This is how it had to be — death and then new life. This was the deepest well of divine strength of all. Death and new life again. And the crowd already knew this, deep in their bones they knew this — that is why all of their guesses of who Jesus must be were of people who had come back from death. Those who have passed through death and back into life, they are able to do the most wondrous things.

Here we are, still in the valley of the shadow of death. 500,000 people dead, a number that can only be made sense of by adding together multiple wars, and all in less than a year. Family members, members of this church, our neighbors. And — and — there are real and tangible signs of progress. A feeling of the road that we have been on, this road through the valley of the shadow of death, that at last the road beneath our feet has begun to slope back up toward the sun.

It is a time that pulls me into a place of questions: What sense will we make of all this? What good could come out of this time of tribulation and death? What new songs shall we sing about this? How is it with your soul? How is it with our souls?

The temptation when answering all these questions is to downplay struggle, gloss over the hardest parts. I'm fine, things are good for me, given all that is going on in the world, I can't complain. This feels to me like strength, to say these things. It feels to me like strength to believe these things. But it's not true.

The deepest well of divine strength is for those who have passed down into the valley of death and back up again into life. When the crowds saw the wondrous

things Jesus was doing, they said he must be John the Baptist back from the dead, Elijah back from heaven's far shores, one of the prophets up out of their graves. No other explanation makes sense for how he could do such wondrous things.

How is it with our souls? How long are the shadows of death around us? Does it feel as if the road has at last begun to climb back into life?

We do not need to have this all figured out right now. But the temptation will be not to figure it out at all. The temptation will be not to even try to make sense of all this senselessness. The temptation will be to run joyfully back into life without having reckoned with what it means to have come back from the dead. How is it with our souls? What sense will we make of all this? What good could come out of this time of tribulation and death? What new songs shall we sing about this?

What new thing will we be able to do? What new hope might we embody in a world where hope is scarce?

How is it with your soul? Really?