

September 16, 2012
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“God’s Messiah or Mine?”

David Baylor

Proverbs 1:20-33
Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 - 8:1
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

*Spirit of God, as you seek to enlighten our path,
grant us the wisdom to recognize the Messiah;
the wisdom and the will to seek the way He shows;
and the wisdom, the will and the courage to follow in the way of the cross,
and fulfill our true calling. Amen.*

Well, it has been an “interesting” week! “Interesting” as in that old blessing/curse, “May you live in interesting times.” Frankly, to default to language I used as a young submariner in the Navy decades ago, in far too many ways this has been a week from Hell.

The anniversary of 9/11 always catches me off guard in ways I don’t expect. And the deaths of the Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three of his staff in Libya this Tuesday brought a special measure of grief, anger and sadness. The ongoing hatred and violence, and the stupidity and self-righteousness which brought this on, are both incomprehensible and reprehensible.

In situations like this when I’m besieged with one report after another like we’ve experienced this past week, I tend to be obsessive and try to stay glued to my radio, the TV or my online news sources. Fortunately, I was eventually rescued from this by the need to start some serious study and reflection on the lessons for this week, to see what I could share that might be enlightening or motivating. And what a rich vein of material this week to mine for this!

I was tempted to tackle the letter from James, but since my tongue already gets me in enough trouble, this could end up entirely too personal, so it seemed best not to go there. Proverbs offered other treasures. The image of an embodied Wisdom crying out in the streets and squares, at the busiest corners and the entrance gates to the city, trying to get people to pay attention, and to embrace the knowledge she offers, is hard to resist. We could probably do some interesting things with “waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them...”!

And then there’s the real gem of our responsive reading from the Wisdom of Solomon! Did you like that? Yes, it was a little different from our usual psalm, but look at the hope and assurance in phrases like:

*“in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets;”
and
“She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.”*

In the end, though, it was the substance of this week’s Gospel from Mark that finally trumped all other considerations. And as I now often do since Stephanie introduced me to his writings last year, to help me better unravel the threads in this Gospel, I turned again to a commentary by theologian Fred Craddock.

As Craddock explains, one reason these verses are particularly special is that this section represents a turning point in Mark’s Gospel. This is where Jesus begins to teach about his coming passion and where he starts the journey to Jerusalem where that the story of that passion will all play out. This is a story we know quite well today, of course, but it was beyond the grasp of his disciples at the time. This is also the launching point for a larger body of material that will finally culminate for us on October 21 with Mark 10:45.

Craddock describes three episodes altogether in this section¹. The first [vv. 27-28] is marked by Jesus asking his disciples “Who do people say I am?” The second [vv. 29-30] begins with Jesus asking the disciples who they think he is, and goes on to incorporate Peter’s response and Jesus’ admonishment that they not tell anyone else about this. The third episode turns upon Jesus sharing the news of his coming suffering and rejection by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and his death and resurrection.

In considering that first episode, Ken Kesselus, a retired Episcopal priest in Bastrop, TX, notes that this section of Mark finds Jesus looking for an assessment of the effectiveness of his public ministry to this point. He wants to know if people “really understand what God was doing in and through him,” if they really “get” what it was all leading to.²

As we hear, the disciples responded that some thought he was John the Baptist, others thought he was Elijah come to life again, and still others thought perhaps he might be some other, more contemporary prophet. Remember, there were lots of prophets of wandering around in those days, some of questionable legitimacy and authenticity. And of course, this holds true today as well.

Matt Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, assures us that these answers were certainly reasonable in the context of what had gone before, where much of Jesus' ministry to this point had clearly evoked the legacy of Elijah and John the Baptist and others through Jesus' "calls to repentance, healings, and meals served in the wilderness." But Ken Kesselus suggests that this was just the "warm up" and that what Jesus was really after was to learn who his disciples believed him to be. And this is where we hear Peter – always quick to act, and often without much forethought - proclaiming boldly "You are the Messiah, the Christ."

Matt Skinner submits that Peter's claim "You are the Christ," is an astounding statement. Jesus hasn't yet done anything that looks particularly "Christ"-like, and the few Jewish texts that mention "the Christ" paint a very different picture. Thus, Skinner thinks, Peter's comment is actually anticipatory. By calling Jesus "the Christ," at this point in the story, Peter declares, "I think you're the one who will purify our society, reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you."

Well, Ken Kesselus says, Jesus must have thought, "so far so good!" But it was also clear that Jesus knew that Peter still didn't completely understand what Peter meant by what he said. Kesselus suggests that, "Jesus knew that Peter and the others still interpreted the meaning of 'Messiah' according to the old order, the old understanding. They saw him as the one who would usher in a climactic day of God's deliverance as a mighty warrior. One capable of returning Israel to independence, free from Roman oppression."

So now we come to what I understand to be the crux of this story, and I use that word intentionally. As Fred Craddock points out, "...as we all have, [the disciples had] an image of the coming messiah, but Jesus does not fit it. After all, it is easier to believe that a messiah *will* come than to believe one *has* come..." especially if the messiah in front of you doesn't seem to be the one you wanted or expected and if he doesn't seem to be fulfilling the expectations you had!

This failure of a messiah to fit our expectations can be a real problem for those who are followers, or who think they are followers, depending on who they think they're following. The potential for disappointment can be, well, exponential, depending on what you think you want or need or deserve. Some of you may remember the characterization of Judas in Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Kazantzakis portrays Judas as an intense revolutionary who originally expected Jesus would be the kind of messiah described above – one to take sword in hand and lead a rebellion to deliver Israel from the tyranny of the Romans. But when Judas ultimately decides that this Jesus is not that Messiah, he decides that this Jesus needs to be gotten out of the way so that he can't lead any others down the very different – and in Judas' estimation, dangerous – path of peace and justice that Jesus represented and taught.

This brings us, then, to the third episode, where Jesus begins to describe what is to come, and the suffering he will have to bear. Once again Peter comes up short in understanding where the journey is heading, what has to happen, and in fact, who Jesus truly is! Another commentary on this scene declares that when Jesus laid out this grim vision of what was to come, "The disciples must have been flabbergasted. Peter probably spoke for all of them [when he said]: C'mon, c'mon, you don't want that. Suffering, rejection by everybody or at least everybody who counts in society, and finally, death! Nobody wants that! You don't want that, do you?"⁴

And of course, it is Peter's dedication to a different set of expectations and a different future for Jesus and the disciples that elicits Jesus' famous rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan!" In sum, what Peter and the disciples thought they wanted and thought they had gotten was not in fact what Jesus was offering. And Jesus makes that very clear in the next two verses where we hear these two astounding statements: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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."

Now we usually interpret this "losing of one's life" as the willingness to be martyred and suffer physical death. But it could also be that the life we are called upon to sacrifice is the life we have *imagined* for ourselves, a life of – shall we say? – spiritual and emotional comfort, perhaps one where we can just sit at Jesus' feet and be warm and comfortable and be soothed by beautiful music and kindly sermons, and where Jesus will give us celestial milk and cookies. And of course, for sure we won't have to give our deep-seated need to have things as we always knew them and were comfortable with. And most especially, where we won't have to CHANGE! Just suggesting this could be a possibility, too.

So, let me underscore this with one last insight from Craddock about this question of what Peter and the disciples expected, as well as what we today expect from the Messiah vs. what we actually get!: "Messiah as future keeps one's image intact and makes no demands; messiah as present calls for an altered image and demands an altered self." We may want to consider, then, whether the true Jesus we need to encounter in our present may very likely call for an altered image of ourselves and our lives – as individuals and as a community. In fact, we may in fact have to consider an altered self, which could entail the willingness to risk completely upending our expectations and our pursuit of the status quo, or what we have always understood we deserve. But think of what we may stand to gain!

As with Peter and the others, the Messiah we've gotten may not be the one we wanted or expected, but I'm pretty certain it's the Messiah we're intended to have and the one we need.

Amen?

1. Fred B. Craddock et al, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993). 411-412.
2. Matt Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, "Commentary on the Gospel" for Mark 8:27-38, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>, Lectionary for September 16, 2012
3. The Rev. Ken Kesselus, "Who Is Jesus?", <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2012/08/16/16-pentecost-proper-19-b-sept-16-2012/> September 4, 2012
4. Patrick J. Willson, "The Jesus We Want and the Jesus We Don't – Mark 8:27-38" <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=9502>.

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