

My friend Lisa who grew up here but has lived the last almost 20 years in Minnesota was home for a visit a couple weeks ago. All of the time we spent together was outdoors, and she mentioned, as she almost always does, that she misses the mountains. I get it. I've visited her in Minnesota many times, and although they have lovely forests and she lives by a Superior Lake, there is nothing like this in their landscape. The mountains are meaningful to us because we grew up in their shadows, but throughout human history, people have always looked to mountains with reverence. Even more so than our miles of rolling ridges, in places where tall, imposing, peaks reach up from relatively flat surroundings, locals have regarded their mountains as the dwelling place of gods, be it Mount Olympus, Sinai, Kilimanjaro, Fuji, Denali, or Hermon—where today's gospel takes place. Jesus takes the disciples to Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mount Hermon, where water springs from a crack in the rock of a shallow cave to form the headwaters of the Jordan River, looking for all the world as though it could be the birthplace of life itself. The pagans thought so, and the Greeks named the place Paneas for their god Pan, who was half man, half goat; you can still see ruins of the shrine of the dancing goats. By the time Jesus came along, Herod Philip, one of the client kings of Judea, had rebuilt the city and named it for himself (Philippi for Philip) and in honor of the Roman Emperor (Caesarea for Caesar), who good Roman citizens were supposed to worship as if he were divine. For Jesus to bring his disciples to this place, where for time immemorial gods and men were worshipped, and ask them about his identity—that was a deeply political, subversive, seditious act.

*Who do people say the Son of Man is?* Jesus asks. The disciples have heard what people have said about the prophets and John the Baptist. *But who do you say that I am?* And Peter, who so often answers wrong or messes up, makes his divinely inspired confession, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.* Peter's faith claim is enough for Jesus to name him as the rock on which he will build the church. Although I don't think it's the main point of the story, I do appreciate that Peter, who tends to be famous for moments like trying to walk on water and sinking or falling asleep while Jesus prays in the garden or denying to know Jesus three times before the rooster crows, is the one Jesus entrusts as the founder of the church; good news for us when we're feeling inadequate in our discipleship. Now, Peter will soon demonstrate that he doesn't fully understand what it means that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God; we'll hear about that next week. And still, opinions vary greatly about what it means to be a part of the church and what one can and can't do or believe and still be considered a Christian. But all those nuances in belief and practice rest on the foundation of Peter's proclamation, that Jesus is the Messiah for whom Israel waited; Jesus is the Son of God.

I can't overstate how dangerous it was for Jesus to elicit this confession or for Peter to make it. This was blasphemy in the view of the religious leaders who had ingratiated themselves with the Roman government in order to protect their own power. Jesus was not executed for breaking Roman law, for raising an army and posing a military threat in order to take over as king—even Pilate has to admit that he is innocent. Jesus is crucified because he challenged the religious establishment, and they got the government to do their dirty work, convincing them that Jesus' violation of their religious beliefs made him a threat to society. If you ever need an argument against Christian nationalism, look no further than Christ himself. Although Peter and the other disciples don't yet understand the consequences of naming Jesus *Messiah* and *Son of God*, Jesus knows; and he has more work to do before the inevitability of the cross. So, for now, Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah.

Even for us, as modern disciples, Jesus' two questions demand answers: *Who do people say the Son of Man is?* ...and...*Who do we say that Jesus is?* Most people, if they acknowledge that there was an historical Jesus, agree that his message and example of mercy and compassion, as we find in scripture, are good and good for humanity—whether they believe Jesus was divine or not and whether they practice this or any religion or not. But if Jesus was merely another biblical character, like John or Elijah or one of the prophets, well, the people routinely ignored what John, Elijah, and the other prophets had to say. It requires something more of us when *we* say that Jesus is the Son of the living God; we can't treat him like one more option on the spiritual buffet. Again, when we ask *Who do people say the Son of Man is?* we will find people saying all sorts of things about Jesus—things that we never find in scripture: a Jesus who lacks mercy, a Jesus who demands or coerces devotion, a Jesus who is quick to condemn...many people say that's who God is, but good luck finding examples of that in scripture. For us to claim Jesus—as we know him from the gospels—as the Messiah and the Son of God, means we see Jesus as the living example of God's intentions for us and for this world. When Jesus, the humble servant who healed and fed and gave his life selflessly, is our foundation, we are likewise called to lives of merciful, generous, selfless, service—healing hurts and feeding needs. We have as many options of what to worship as the disciples did when they stood at Caesarea Philippi surrounded by statues and shrines. But we claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God—so any other person is not, and any way of life that does not reflect Jesus' steadfast loving kindness is not the way of salvation. May our lives of loving service reflect our confession that Jesus is Lord.