

Will This Be On The Test?
Matthew 16: 13-20
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Over the years, I have read enough legal thrillers to realize a good trial lawyer never asks a question to which she does not already know the answer. In cross-examination, this can be extremely dangerous. The attorney is inviting the witness to tell the jury some previously unknown revelation. ANSWERS to questions can surprise us.

Likewise, QUESTIONS also can surprise us. For a teacher, it can be awkward to be in the middle of an exciting presentation, and see a hand go up in the classroom (or these days, on an online platform, like Zoom). In the midst of the lesson – with momentum building – do you pause to let the student ask a question? The possibilities are countless! *May I go to the bathroom? Will this be on the test? Or perhaps my favorite, When can I DROP this course???*

In this account of Peter's bold confession, we are invited to consider some significant questions AND answers. But first, let's explore the location of this passage. Matthew specifically mentions it happens in Caesarea Philippi. Take a couple minutes to watch this video from Appian Media to see where Jesus chooses to ask his questions:

Link to video:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/jiagheq2ps2tnuu/Appian%20Media%20Sermon%20Video%202020-8-23.m4v?dl=0>

Caesarea Philippi is in the far north-east of Israel. By car, the trip is about an hour drive from the Sea of Galilee. For Jesus and his disciples, the journey would have been a two-days' walk. Today's story occurs in the shadow of this huge, rock edifice, where a Roman temple stood, and animals were sacrificed to pagan gods. The location is an important piece of the lesson.

As a great teacher, Jesus asks a lot of questions. Some of his questions have obvious answers: Should you light a lamp and hide it under a basket? When a child asks for bread, do you give him a stone? But stay alert – the difficulty of Jesus' questions can increase quickly!

Jesus begins with the easier question: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* He asks the disciples to share public perception of his identity. What is the word on the

street? Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others say Jeremiah. After receiving this list of third-person responses, Jesus asks a more pointed question: *“But who do YOU say that I am?”* Who am I to YOU??

Jesus directs this personal question to all the disciples, but we only have a record of Peter’s answer: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* With sudden clarity, Peter perceives Jesus is not JUST a prophet; nor is he JUST a great teacher and healer. In an absolutely, unique way, Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One – THE Lord and Savior.

Peter’s bold statement – *“You are the Messiah”* – comes as a gracious gift from God. It is not a result of Peter’s clear thinking. (We have often seen how hardheaded and impetuous Peter can be.) In response to Peter’s confession of faith, Jesus gives him a new name: “The Rock.” In both Greek and Aramaic, this is a play on words. In Greek, *Petros* (for Peter) and the word *petra* for “rock” have the same meaning. In effect, Jesus says Peter and his bold confession of faith are the rock – the foundation stone – upon which God will place other stones to build the church.

On the lips of Jesus, this also is a question for you and me today: *“Who do YOU say that I am?”*

In the book *Mere Christianity*, author and theologian C. S. Lewis explains why we must carefully consider our answer. Is Jesus a prophet? A teacher? Or is Jesus THE Messiah? In response to the acceptance of Jesus being a great moral teacher, but not to Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God, Lewis writes this:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut [Jesus] up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about [Jesus] being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

“Who do YOU say that I am?” Is Jesus YOUR Messiah?

There are only two places in the four gospels where the Greek word for “church” (*ekklesia*) appears. One is today’s reading, and the other is in chapter 18 of Matthew’s gospel (Matt 18:17). This new entity – *the church* – is built upon the confessional statement Jesus Christ is THE Messiah, the Son of God.

When we proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, we acknowledge Christ reigns in our lives and in the world. Christ is the Anointed One, God’s Son and our King. For some reason we cannot fully comprehend, Christ chooses not to reign alone. Instead, Jesus calls forth ordinary people to be his church. We – you and me – are to be the presence of Christ, in and for the world.

In stark contrast to the rubble of ancient temples at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is not building a physical city or Temple, which might be destroyed over time; rather, Jesus is building a community. The church is a community of people who proclaim Jesus as the Messiah – OUR Lord and God. And this community – this movement – “starts then and there, at Caesarea Philippi, with Peter’s declaration.”²

Over the summer, Westminster’s Memorial Garden has been undergoing a renovation. A large ossuary has been installed, new landscaping has been planted, and – most recently – an outdoor, stone labyrinth is being constructed. Here is a photograph to give you some idea:



A LOT of stones have been placed! Also, notice the wooden templates used to build the labyrinth. The templates maintain the necessary spacing for each turn. These templates provide shape and guidance for the labyrinth during construction.

In a similar way, Jesus is our template for how to “Be The Church.” He sets an example for us and gives us a model to follow. Jesus the Christ provides the blueprints for building and BEING the church.

An appropriate initial response is to fall at Jesus’ feet, and worship him as Lord and God – but eventually we must get up. Surprisingly, we are the plan – THE ANSWER – for what God wants to accomplish in the world. We – THE CHURCH – are called to carry on what Jesus started. We must rise up and keep moving forward!

Life is full of surprising questions and answers. Especially right now, there seem to be more unanswered and terrifying questions, than helpful or hopeful answers. You are not alone in these experiences of anxiety, injustice, and sorrow.

Nearing the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus leaves the familiar area of Galilee. But before traveling south to Jerusalem – beginning HIS journey to a cross – he leads the disciples on a two-days' walk north to Caesarea Philippi. There – at the headwaters of the Jordon River, in the presence of Roman might and pagan worship – Jesus asks, “*Who do you say that I am?*”

Jesus takes them two days in the wrong direction to make an emphatic point. As THE Messiah, Jesus' kingdom is not built of rock, but of people; his power does not come from violent force, but from love; his worship is not founded on sacrificing animals, but on the selfless, sacrificial words and deeds of his followers.

Who is your Lord and Savior? “*Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.*”

It is a question we answer, as we join the church. However, our response does not end there. Living out our answer is an ongoing JOURNEY. Along the way, Jesus will ask some surprising questions, and also provide many remarkable answers. Be assured, we are not alone as we journey. God is with us.

The Romans built great temples of white marble to worship their gods. In contrast, Jesus gathers a community of people, who boldly answer his question and are invited to follow him. “*Who do you say that I am?*” This is the invitation Christ continues to make over and over and over again – to each one of us.³

Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1943.

² N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two: Chapters 16-28*, 2004.

³ Debie Thomas, “But What Do You Think?” <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>, posted August 16, 2020.