

I

Who do people say that I am?

To my seventh-grade teacher, I was “Jethro.” Apparently, the actor who played the character of Jethro on the 1960s television show *The Beverly Hillbillies* was Max Baer. I am no relation to Max Baer, but nonetheless, my teacher thought he was terribly clever in giving me that nickname.

I once worked as a waiter and a banquet server for a time, and the kitchen staff took to calling me *El Oso Grande*, which in Spanish translates to “The Big Bear.”

And of course, there are three little boys who live in our house who simply know me as “Daddy.”

Who do people say that I am? I am many things to many people, depending on the context and depending on the relationship between us.

II

Of course, that’s true for all of us. We may be professors or attorneys or physicians or business owners. We may be students or teachers, daughters or sons, moms or dads, aunts or uncles or grandmas or grandpas. We may be Bulldogs or Yellowjackets or Tigers or Gladiators or Jaguars or Spartans or Trojans or Warriors.

Who do people say that we are?

III

This winter and spring, we’ve been making our way through the gospel according to Mark. Thus far, the action in Mark’s gospel has been centered around the Sea of Galilee, which isn’t really a sea so much as it is a large inland lake, about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Jesus and the disciples have crossed the lake from one side to the other a time or two, and Jesus has paid a visit to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, but for the most part, up until now, Jesus public ministry has been centered in the villages and towns that line the shores of the lake.

But all of that begins to shift today. Our story this morning is drawn from the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth chapters of Mark’s gospel. At 16 chapters, Mark is the shortest of the gospels, and so you can think of today’s reading as the midpoint of the story, the halfway marker of the journey. And from here on out, the story will be moving toward Jerusalem, and the cross and the tomb that are waiting there.

When our story opens this morning, Jesus and the disciples are moving away from the Sea of Galilee and up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And as they’re walking, Jesus begins an important conversation with his disciples about identity, purpose, and meaning.

And so with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Mark, beginning in the eighth chapter at the 27th verse, and leading us through the ninth chapter, concluding at the eighth verse.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world

and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

In case you hadn't noticed yet, 2020 is an election year, and the airwaves are already chock full of campaign ads, most of which are some variation of, "Vote for me, and all your wildest dreams will come true." And of course, with each passing election cycle,

social media plays an ever-larger role. The campaigns of even the most technology-challenged candidates now employ sophisticated operations aimed at building more and more “followers” for their candidate.

But I have yet to hear a single candidate for office, whether running for the highest office in the land or for assistant dog catcher, stand at a podium and say, “My campaign is about self-denial and cross bearing and suffering and death! Follow me!”

And I think that’s why Peter was so flabbergasted with Jesus. Because when Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter considered all that he had seen and heard up to this point.

Peter recalled the way that Jesus healed the paralytic who was lowered through the ceiling in the house in Capernaum.

Peter thought about how, when they were caught in a bad storm, Jesus had rebuked the wind and the waves, and said, “Peace be still,” and there was instantly a dead calm.

Peter remembered the way that Jesus had commanded the Legion of demons to come out of the man who lived among the tombs in the land of the Gerasenes. Peter and James and John were in the room where it happens when Jesus took a dead little girl by the hand and said to her, *Talitha cum!* and she stood up and walked again.

Peter had listened carefully as Jesus took on the religious authorities and their notions about who was pure and impure.

Who do you say that I am?

Peter knew in his heart of hearts that Jesus was the One whom the Hebrew Scriptures foretold – the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah – the one who would ascend the throne and rule over the kingdom of Israel forever – the one who would restore the fortunes of God’s people – the one who would make everything wrong in the world right again.

And so he answered from his heart: “You are the Messiah.”

I wonder if Peter was beginning to envision Jesus’ Messiah campaign, with stump speeches and balloon drops and the roar of adoring crowds. I wonder if he was envisioning himself as Jesus’ campaign manager, with an eye on a key cabinet post for himself in King Jesus’ new administration.

But then Jesus goes pops all those balloons in Peter’s head. He begins to speak openly about all that is to come – about how he’s going to Jerusalem be handed over to the elders and the chief priests and the scribes. About how he’s going to be killed, but after three days, how he will rise again.

And so Peter decides that he's better handle his candidate. He pulls Jesus aside and begins to try to talk some sense into him.

But Jesus is having none of it. Loud enough for everyone to hear, Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan!"

And then Jesus calls a team meeting on the spot. He says, in Ryan's Revised Translation –

Look, folks, here's how this campaign is going to work. If you're going to be a part of this movement, if you want to be my followers, then it absolutely cannot be about you. This campaign, this movement is going somewhere. And you can take it to the bank that there will be a cross involved. You can take it to the bank that it's going to get hard. You can take it to the bank that this campaign is going to require you to do things that seem to be counter to your human instincts for self-promotion and self-preservation.

So if you're in this thing only for you, you can't possibly win. But if you're willing to surrender your will and the care of your life over to me, if you're willing to lay it all on the line for my sake and the sake of this movement, you can't possibly lose.

This is no way to run a campaign for elected office! No one gets elected to anything by telling the voters to deny themselves. No one gets elected by

talking to the voters about suffering and crosses and losing on purpose.

But Jesus isn't running for elected office. He's establishing his claim as the Messiah, the long-promised, long-awaited redeemer of the people of God, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet, the one who will make all that is wrong with the world right again, the one who will be handed over, undergo great suffering, be killed, and three days later, rise again.

IV

Who do *people* say that Jesus is? Some say he never existed, that he's just a character that someone made up, second cousin to Harvey the Rabbit.

Some say he's an interesting historical figure who lived long ago in a land far away and developed quite a following, in the same ways Genghis Kahn lived long ago in a land far away and developed quite a following.

Some say he was a great teacher of moral philosophy, on the order of Socrates or Plato or Aristotle.

Some say he's one of God's prophets, on the order of Moses or Elijah.

But then Jesus brings the question from the general to the specific. Then Jesus puts the question to you, my friend: who do *you* say that he is?

Peter says that he is the Messiah.

The voice from the cloud says,
“This is my Beloved Son!”

But you must answer that
question for yourself, my friend.

And you have some options
before you. If you decide that Jesus is
just a made-up story, or an interesting
historical figure, or someone worth
admiring, you’ll be in good company.
Lots of people in our community, in our
nation, indeed around the world would
agree with you.

But if you’re convinced that Jesus
is who he says he is, if you’re convinced
that Jesus is Lord, then be warned,
because there’s a price to be paid for
that claim, because there can only be
one Lord, one person or authority or
ruler to whom your ultimate allegiance
demanded.

So if Jesus is your Lord, if Jesus
is your Messiah, if Jesus your Savior,
then no candidate for office or elected
official can be Lord, no matter what you
think of his or her qualifications or
positions on the issues, no matter how
much he or she “owns” the opposition.

If Jesus is your Lord, then the
nation that your favorite candidate or
elected official proposes to lead cannot
possess your ultimate allegiance.

If Jesus is your Lord, if Jesus is
your Messiah, if Jesus is your Savior,
then your wallet is not, for what will it
profit you to gain the whole world and
forfeit your very self? Indeed, what can
you give in exchange for your self?

This campaign is going
somewhere, my friend, and Jesus invites
you to follow him this day. Not once
does he suggest that his path will be
easy. He only promises that it will be
worth it.

V

“Preacher, I don’t want to hear
about politics from the pulpit!”

I’ve lost count of how many times
I’ve heard some version of that
statement over the years. But let’s pause
for just a moment and parse that word,
“politics.” The word “politics” is derived
from the Greek word “polis,” which can
be translated as “city” or “community.”
So at its basic root, politics is simply a
conversation about the public good, and
by that definition, the gospel is
inherently political, because as the
Messiah, as the rightful ruler of all
creation, Jesus is intensely interested in
the flourishing of all people.

Where we seem to be struggling
so much these days is with “partisan”
conversations. The word “partisan” is
derived from Italian, and if you’re a
student of history, you may recall the
Italian partisans who sowed so much
destruction and violence in 20th century
Italy. Partisan conversations are not

good-faith debates among neighbors about what is best for the public good – they’re conversations about preserving or gaining power and discrediting and destroying anyone who would offer a challenge or a critique.

So the great challenge for us, especially in this election year, will be to heed the words of Jesus – to deny ourselves:

To deny our incessant need to be right

To deny our desire to “own” those who would disagree with us

To deny our instinct when provoked to retaliate 100-fold

To deny our instincts to keep silent when justice demands that we should speak up

To deny our instincts to speak when mercy demands that we should listen

The challenge for us, especially in this election year, will be to pick up the cross:

To refuse to meet violence with violence

To refuse to repay evil with evil

To refuse to surrender to despair and scorn

And to follow Jesus wherever he may lead.

For the paradox of the cross is this:

It is in giving that we ourselves receive.

It is in forgiving that we ourselves are forgiven.

And it is in dying that we ourselves are raised to Eternal Life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.