

Karen Hollis
Sermon – Mark 8:27-38
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I wasn't pushy about being Christian when I was in high school, but I think it was pretty well known that I went to church. Several of my school friends were also church friends and we talked about our awesome youth leader and mission trips we went on in the summers. One day at lunch I was in the crowded hallway looking for a place to park myself when a girl I came up to me. She and I knew each other, but weren't particularly friends. I knew she was Christian, likely more conservative than myself. She said, "Hey Karen, do you want to debate whether Jesus was God?" I thought about it for a split second and simply said, "No," and then sat down to eat my lunch. The conversation never came up again and it didn't seem to have any particular impact on our non-existent friendship. But the memory has always stuck with me and I still chuckle about it . . . it's hilarious to me, given where I am now, how disinterested I was in talking about Jesus' divinity or lack thereof. Had I accepted, I'm sure the interaction would have been more about my curiosity about what she believed and less of an actual debate, because while I didn't believe Jesus was God, I had absolutely nothing to back it up. It just wasn't something that was really on my radar.

In Youth Group we read Bible stories about Jesus, talked about the wisdom he shared, and the importance of taking his teaching to heart. We referred to him mostly as a teacher. I remember being about 14 – it was around Easter time, so one of those made-for-tv movies about Jesus' life was on repeat on one particular channel. My sister and I watched part of it, wondering together if we really bought into the story of his life. My sister said, "I mean, I'm sure he was a guy who lived a life." And I enthusiastically agreed. That was the first time I considered the actual life of Jesus, not the Jesus I encountered in the scriptures. It was the first time I thought about the stories being derived from the life he actually lived.

So who is Jesus? Is he a guy who lived a life? Is he a teacher and healer? Is he one prophet among many? Is he the Messiah? Is he the Son of God? Is he God incarnate? If we set up the room with “guy who lived a life” at the back and “God incarnate” at the front with several markers in between, and asked people to stand next to the one that most closely describes their beliefs, I dare say we would find ourselves spread across the whole spectrum. There are some churches where membership includes believing specific things about Jesus, but this isn’t one of them.

It’s an important question to ask ourselves, who do we say Jesus is? The answer has implications for the shape of our personal faith. The people in Jesus’ day weren’t even in agreement about it. Elijah, John the Baptizer, one of the many prophets or the Messiah?

First of all, who were these guys? Who were Elijah and John the Baptizer? We heard a story about Elijah earlier in the summer – he was fleeing for his life and an angel fed him and gave him water so he would have strength for his journey. Elijah lived 850 years before Jesus; he anointed kings and performed many miracles with God’s power – it makes sense that people would wonder about Jesus’ connection with him. The really unique thing about Elijah is that he never died, but was taken up to heaven on a chariot of fire. At the Passover Seder Jews still set a place at the table for Elijah . . . you never know when he might show up!

John the Baptizer was a devout man and served God humbly and without question. He preached the good news of the coming of Christ, invited people to repent and be baptized, and of course, fulfilled his call to baptize Jesus. King Herod wondered if Jesus was John raised from the dead, because he didn’t hear about Jesus until after John’s death . . . apparently some others had a similar idea.

And then Messiah . . . we hear that word a lot during Advent and Christmas time; a Messiah has been born to us in the city of David. What’s a Messiah? An

anointed or consecrated person, a person who is set apart for a holy purpose, like a priest or a saint or a king, such as David, the revered king of Israel. The term implies that this human will save the people and rule in God's name, like King David.

Interestingly, Messiah is a Hebrew word – its corresponding word in Greek is Christ. Jesus the Christ: Jesus, the anointed one, set apart for the purpose of saving and transforming the world. We understand this to be a divine title . . .

But Peter isn't thinking about divine things; he is thinking about a king. They're expecting a Messiah to do the requisite things. A Messiah is supposed to 1. Cleanse the temple 2. Defeat the enemy (Rome) 3. Bring God's justice to Israel and the world. Messiah, huh, Jesus considers Peter's response, "well, don't tell them that!" Telling people he's the Messiah is not going to help keep him alive, not if the Romans think he's going to overthrow their army!

How does Jesus explain divine things to a bunch of people who think he's going to be an earthly king? Jesus goes with the truth – this man will die, and after 3 days he will be raised.

But confused disciples wonder, how can he conquer Rome if he's dead? This isn't the way it goes. Jesus is not on an unstoppable trajectory toward death.

It's hard for us to step into the disciples' shoes, knowing what we do about the resurrection, but imagine if you will, Jesus saying, well humans have put the earth on an unstoppable path of destruction. It will become uninhabitable, but after 3 days will be restored and God will do a new thing. It's not terribly comforting because there is so much we don't know. Like the disciples with Jesus, we don't know what that death might look like, or where that leaves us, or the implications of renewal. [I'm not going to leave you here, but just hang in with me here in the discomfort for a minute.]

Jesus doesn't say these things to make anyone feel good; he isn't in the business of taking the easy route or making people comfortable. He invites us

to consider our relationship with the divine, to wrestle with our theology, to wrestle with who Jesus is, and invites us in to walk forward in that relationship, directly toward the thing that is hard and scary and uncertain, because avoiding it is unimaginable.

Jesus invites us to not take the easy route, to take up our cross and follow, to face what is before us, but remember . . . and [this is the good part] . . . he simultaneously invites us to trust in the power of the resurrection. He invites us to trust that our God, who makes all things new, will transform death into a manifestation of life that answers our specific need. It's made specifically for us; Christ transforms it with us in mind. It is a gift that affirms that new life is inevitable with divine things.