

## **Sermon: Getting Behind Jesus, Again!**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, September 12, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It really was a blessing. I am referring to the trip that Daisy and I took to Israel in 2019. It was a long-hoped for dream coming true; it came quite unexpectedly; it had broaden and deepen my own faith, my appreciation of the Bible. I particularly love diving into the geography of the region, and finding new insights in the Scripture. So in today's passage of Mark 8:27-38, the reference to the district of Caesarea Philippi perked my interest, I was there, I took pictures, and learned new things.

The area is located at the foot of Mt. Hermon, just north of Galilee, in the land originally allotted to the tribe of Dan. It is a beautiful region, lush, green, and on the main source of the river Jordan, which flows into the lake of Galilee, through the Jordan valley, passing Jericho and into the Dead Sea. One could argue that river Jordan was (and still is) the main source of water that gives life to Israel, in the land that is often referred to in the Old Testament as 'from Dan to Beersheba'.

If one was to walk and follow that water source upstream, back to its origin, one would inevitably arrive at a grotto that is seemingly carved out of a giant rock at the foot of Mt. Hermon. That grotto, the town nearby, that whole area in the time of Jesus was called Caesarea Philippi. Of course, it wasn't always called that. The name of that region seemed to follow whatever god was worshipped, and whatever temple was built there at the time.

In the Old Testament, it was called Baal-gad, after the Canaanite thunder god Baal. The Greeks later substituted their god Pan, god of the wild, shepherds and flocks. A shrine was built into the rock, and the town took the name Paneas. Herod the Great built a marble temple to worship Augustus Caesar, who had given him the town. It was Philip the tetrarch who later renamed the town Caesarea in honour to the emperor. The addition of 'Philippi' was to distinguish it from the coastal city of Caesarea on the shore of Mediterranean Sea.

Archeological dig of the area revealed a number of temples built in and around the original grotto. When Jesus set foot on the town near the

grotto, some two thousands years ago, no less than 7 shrines were in existence, worshipping 5 distinct deities. That must have been a magnificent, amusing, and perhaps confusing sight to behold.

It was in that context, Jesus asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that I am?”** (Mark 8:27) It really was a vague question, soliciting general sentiments on people’s impression of Jesus, sort of modern equivalent of checking Twitter or Facebook, to see what people say about a certain celebrity. To this vague question, the disciples gave an even more vague reply, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets. Kind of like throwing multiple darts at the same time, hoping one would land on the bullseye. Missed, missed, and missed.

It was at that point, Jesus pushed the disciples and made his intention crystal clear, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Compelling the disciples to make a personal declaration on what they truly believe Jesus to be. To this question, Peter, oh once again Peter, jumping out of the boat without much thinking. Peter declared, “You are the Messiah”, and in the parallel passage in Matthew 16:16, Peter added, “You are the Son of the Living God.

Let us pause here, and simply appreciate what Peter just declared. Ever since Jesus was born, there has always been vigorous debates as to who Jesus is. The three major Abrahamic religions—that is Judaism, Christianity and Islam—draw their differentiation right around the identity of Jesus. The Jews acknowledge Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher. The Muslims acknowledge Jesus as a prophet, among others but only the Christians profess that Jesus is the Christ, the long awaited Messiah, and the only begotten Son of the One True God. But, that profession of faith came out of a torturous process of the early Church, where lively and vigorous debates over the divinity of Jesus often descended into violence and persecution. That process took over 300 or so years, was finally settled during the Council of Nicaea in the 4th century.

Yet, here was Peter, before any learned theologians had their say, in the midst of much confusion about who Jesus was. Here was Peter professing Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. It would not be a stretch to describe that dialogue, that declaration, to be the high point of Peter’s journey of faith, ever since he began following Jesus on the shore of Galilee.

Mark’s Gospel doesn’t include the response from Jesus, only that he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him, as his time has

not yet arrived. Yet in the same parallel passage of Matthew 16:17, Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” It would not be a stretch to imagine Peter, entertaining such a praise, having a big grin on his face, doing a mental fist pump—“Yah, I got that one right!”

Before embarking on seminary study in pursuit of Christian ministry, I was an independent commodity futures trader working on the floor of the Montreal Exchange. Since I was trading my own capital in a highly volatile market, I had built up a discipline of tabulating my daily profit and loss. One peculiar thing that I observed was that, often my biggest daily loss would follow soon after my biggest daily gain. It’s really not that hard to understand. When one tastes success, one gets cocky. You think you are on the top of the world. You say to yourself, “Yah, I got that one right!” Then you would enviably pay for that arrogance.

It is with that lens that I look at what happened next to Peter. Jesus began to teach 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. Essentially predicting his own martyrdom. But Peter would not have it. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

The author of Mark, being fairly economical with words, does not pen down what Peter actually said to Jesus. However, the author of Matthew recorded Peter as saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” (Matthew 16:22) Then Jesus turning around to face Peter and replied, “**Get behind me, Satan!** For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:33)

**Get behind me, Satan!** It was a rebuke, the Scripture informs us so, yet I couldn’t help but think of it as more ‘a slap on the wrist’ than an actual rebuke. “Satan” in its most original understanding is someone who accuses. Being called ‘Satan’ by one’s own teacher is certainly not a pleasant thing. Yet notice that Jesus said ‘get behind me, not ‘get away from me’, or ‘begone’, but ‘get behind me’, once again!

It is a reminder to Peter, as to who is the leader, who is the follower. It is a reminder to Peter that when he first dropped everything—his fishing gear, his boat, even his family—he had already assumed the posture of a follower. It is a reminder to Peter that he had once trusted; an invitation for him to trust again. It is a reminder to Peter, and to all of us, that it is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah, we must also be ready to embrace this Messiah, as the one who will examine our deepest thoughts, who will

demand our absolute allegiance, who will ask us to pick up our own cross to simply follow. This Messiah will require all his followers to change, from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to compassion, from fear to love, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy, which can only come from God.

During the fourth year of ministry in my former pastoral charge, an imminent crisis of conflict and division was taking place, partly due to unresolved hurts of various factions dating back prior to my arrival, partly due also to my inexperience—misreading and mishandling of the situation. In any case, I had wanted to run away from it all, so I tendered my resignation to the Presbytery of Montreal. A special committee was appointed to look into that whole mess, and eventually cleared me of any wrongdoing. The special committee then moved a motion agreeing with my hope to resign from the pastoral charge. Yet in an unprecedented debate and decision, the Presbytery narrowly rejected that motion, essentially returning me to the congregation to continue serving as the minister.

After that meeting, when I was still in a state of shock, Moderator of the Presbytery came to me in a most pastoral way. He explained that the congregation is now ‘my cross to bear’, the cost of following Christ. He then advised me to obediently return, to focus on preaching Christ, and let the Presbytery handle all the messy politics.

It was as if Jesus himself was saying to me that day, ‘**Get behind me, Paul! Get behind me, again!**’ So I did. I returned to the congregation, picked up where it was left off, gave it all to rebuild that body of Christ, for seven more fruitful years.

Looking back, I can certainly say that God is good, God is faithful. I can confidently say that: not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God. I can only give praise and glory to Jesus the Christ, head of the Church, Son of the living God. I trusted, I followed, and Jesus did not disappoint. Coming out the pandemic, as the congregation of St. Giles is discerning on how best to rebuild. Here is a reminder to all of us to get behind Jesus. He is on the move, he is taking the lead. We simply have to trust and follow.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**