

K(no)w Wisdom
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 13, 2015
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Text: Mark 8; James 3; Proverbs 1

The setting for the story we heard from Mark 8 is a place that I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit. The reading starts by telling us that Jesus is with his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, and when I was able to spend some time in Israel/Palestine in 2007, I was able to visit that region. Unless you're a biblical scholar (which there are actually a few of here!), the location of 'Caesarea Philippi' means little, but for folks of Jesus' day it would have meant a lot. It's an area toward the north in Israel and it's not the kind of place a good Jewish person would hang around much. It was something of the 'sin city' of the day, but actually with very religious associations. What I saw when I was there was the remains of a Greek temple – the temple of Pan, who was a Greek god of the wild; and this temple complex was also used as place to offer worship to the Roman Emperor, the Caesar hailed as divine. The rituals for Pan were infamous - involved all sorts of debauchery and perversity; and the worship for the emperor was a glorification of the royal power. What I saw were temple ruins, but in Jesus' day it was an impressive site, and a popular one – religion, sex and power all brought together.

There is no specific record of Jesus taking his disciples to this temple of Pan in Caesarea Philippi, but the mention of this location in the story is alerting us to pay attention. Good upstanding Jews would not be found there – but there they are; and in going there it seems to me that Jesus compelled his disciples to think about the “spirituality” that surrounded them and what to make of it all – to think about religion and gods and God – about the power of religion to take one away from God.

So it's with all this going on, that we come upon this part of the story:

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

Peter gets it right! – Jesus is the promised one of God – but the whole thing about this story is that Peter gets it all right and then that Peter gets it all wrong: it all unfolds very quickly - Peter declares Jesus “Messiah”; then Jesus tells them that he must suffer and die and rise; then Peter REBUKES Jesus for such talk; then Jesus ULTRA-REBUKES Peter: ‘get behind me, Satan!’

And I think what is going on here has a lot to do with where it is going on – in Caesarea Philippi. When Peter tries to rebuke Jesus the Messiah for talking of suffering and death, he is strangely enough promoting the kind of warped spirituality that surrounds them there – now I’m not saying Peter is trying to replicate the temple of Pan; but I am saying that Peter has in mind that power and control would be the marks of this Messiah movement. NO! – Jesus says – Satan is the power of this world that controls and diminishes; the power of the Messiah, Jesus says, is very different – a way of God that enters into life to give life; a way of giving your life to find life.

Let that percolate for a bit, and let’s turn to James. James the Apostle has a lot to say about putting faith into action – last Sunday was about compassion and generosity: ‘faith without works is dead.’ The reading today is about speech – the power of the tongue to build up and tear down. And there is much for me to hear in this passage about the words I choose each day; much for each of us to hear in the power of our speech to harm or heal. But this is more than a passage about talking nice. As the Gospel faces the question “Who do you say I am?” with the answer of “a Messiah who gives his life”; what if James then faces us with the question “HOW do we say who Jesus is?” – making clear that the words the church uses can cause great harm or bear great fruit - that how we speak of God can be foul water or living water. And here’s something I hadn’t really noticed in this passage before, it says that what is at stake here is the impact of our words on others who are all made in the image of God – *verses 9-10* “*Our speech can bless the Lord and curse those made in the likeness of God – this ought not be so*” This is about more than talking nice - this is a creation image here: just as the word of God creates humanity in God’s likeness, in a relationship of blessing with God, so too our words are meant to create blessing – speaking a word that reflects others as children of God. That’s what’s there in

James – isn't that something? Our call as the church of the Messiah – the God who comes to give life - is to create blessing with our words.

Let that percolate a bit too, as we turn to Proverbs, which is all about Wisdom – it is the figure of Wisdom as she speaks of the ways of God, reveals God, cries out for true knowledge and worship of God. Wisdom is described in Proverbs as an embodiment of the life and vitality found in God's ways – but Wisdom has no interest in talking nice – Wisdom lays it on the line. Wisdom's message is something like this: 'God has shown the ways of life – to know God's ways and follow them leads to true life – this is Wisdom; but to ignore God's word and ways is to bring on calamity and chaos – and I laugh at the mess you've made; your path of destruction is of your own making, and I am not going to rescue you.' Wisdom does not mince words – there are consequences for how God's ways are lived out or not – and the figure of Wisdom sees the folly of squandering God's gifts.

Hope Church, I have something for us to consider today. At our adult ed class this morning, our speaker was Dr. Sahibzada, the Imam from the Islamic Center in GR – and he gave a very good class today about the faith of Islam. But in my 25 years as a Christian Pastor and the 16 years I have gratefully served at Hope Church, that is the first time I've been part of inviting and hearing a leader of Islam to share with us: 'my sisters and brothers, this ought not to be so.' We profess the Messiah as our Lord, who says God's way calls us to give our lives for others; but I wonder if the church like Peter has too much wanted to hold to a place of power and control – preserving Jesus for status rather than following in service. We proclaim the good news – but I wonder if often the tongue of the church has spoken to others more of the language of curse than of blessing, more a word of division than of invitation to others made in the likeness of God.

Certainly even here in little ol' Holland we know about the setting of Caesarea-Phillippi – a world too full of power used to diminish and control; and we know too well a world of discord and calamity among God's children. But I wonder today if Wisdom calls us to see and confess the part that the church plays in such calamity – that whenever and however the church holds to power and curse rather than service and blessing, well then, "get behind me Satan" – for we

stand in the way of the Lord of life giving his life to the world. I wonder if we can see that today as we listen to and pray for our Islamic neighbors that we are following the call of the Lord of life to be a community of service and to offer a word of blessing; if we can see that such a path is the Wisdom that steers from calamity into the ways of peace.

That is our calling - to be nourished in this path, with this Wisdom and this word, by this Lord of life – come to the table, for all things are ready. AMEN.