

**Please, Listen to Him**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
February 11, 2018

**Scriptures:**

<sup>9:2</sup>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, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

**Mark 9:2--9 (NRSVA)**

**Introduction and Comments:**

Our text today about listening to Jesus reminds me of a story of a woman telling her pastor, "I hope you didn't take it personally when my husband walked out during your sermon." "I did find it rather disconcerting," the pastor replied.

"It's not a reflection on you, please don't take it personally," insisted the woman. "You see, Clyde has been walking in his sleep ever since he was a child."

**Sermon:**

All four gospels narrate Jesus' life from within their authors' cultural perspectives addressing the religious and social implications of the gospel for their communities. However, each gospel in its own way asks the reader or listeners, individually and collectively, the same question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" Interestingly, who Jesus is in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is usually defined by others not by Jesus himself.

A little background on this statement. In Jesus' culture, how a person saw and understood themselves was all about how others thought about and saw them. In short, a person expected others to tell them who they were within the context of either their family and clan, place of origin, group of origin, inherited craft-trade, and various other associations. Thus, "I" is always "We" and "We" was always "I". (Malina & Neyrey, 1991, p. 75) Therefore, given this kind of understanding, people understood others in highly stereotypical ways. (Malina & Neyrey, 1991, p. 75).

The New Testament authors expected their readers to know all this, especially the stereotypes. Thus, we get the idea in the gospels that most, if not all, Pharisees are legalist, all Sadducees are elitist, who do not believe in the resurrection; the rich are all greedy crooks, and all Galileans are backward, country bumpkins.

In these ancient, socio-cultural models, what we would call a person's conscience is simply their sensitivity to what others think about them within their various social and family roles. (Malina & Neyrey, 1991, p. 75) Therefore, in the gospels we see that Jesus is generally told by others who he is. Sometimes he is told who he is by the demons, the crowd, his family,

the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, or his disciples. In Matthew and Luke, who Jesus is, is also proclaimed by the angels and shepherds before and just after his birth, but not in Mark's Gospel. In the Gospel of John, the author states that Jesus is the incarnation of the preexistent Logos, the world soul or mind.

In Mark's Gospel, the first gospel written, Jesus very pointedly asked his disciples two of the most provocative questions of all time. These questions are on point for today's scriptures about the Transfiguration; wherein, God again labels or tells people who Jesus is. Let me share these questions from earlier passages in Mark's Gospel with you.

<sup>27</sup>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?" <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." <sup>29</sup>He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." (the *Anointed One*) <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Mark 8:27--30 (NRSVA) [That is, don't share these labels with anyone else.]

In Mark's Gospel, we will see that Jesus understands himself simply as a human being, a son of man, albeit a man who has a passionate calling and an anointing of God's spirit. However, over the history of Christianity, people have given various answers to the questions, "Who do people say that I am?" and "..., who do you, my disciples, say that I am?" These answers have given rise to countless arguments, doctrinal squabbles, explanations, and, yes, even several religious pogroms.

I believe many Christians still misunderstand who Jesus was for the author or Mark and his world as well as ours because we tend to read scriptures through our highly individualistic, western success-failure-sin-guilt oriented worldviews.

As early Hellenistic, Jewish Christians, such as the authors of our gospels, sought to understand and explain the nature of Jesus as the Christ of God for their Jewish and non-Jewish communities, they of necessity had to use existing religious and philosophical understandings drawn from pervasive Greek metaphysics and their own Greek influenced Judaism and scriptures. To this point, I want us to know that as much as we may think that Christianity has nailed down a consensus about who Jesus was and is and how he was what he was and is, let me assure you we have not. We still have great Christological debates raging and communities of faith polarized by differing views on who Jesus was and is.

Much has been said and written about Jesus' humanity verses his divinity; his preexistence as a spiritual being or entity, or whether he was a unique creation of God. Some people still believe him to be the latest and greatest of the divinely, anointed sons of God - a prophet - or spiritual ruler-king. Therefore, we have not come as far as we might think in answering Jesus' questions. Therefore, these questions of Mark's Jesus are just as fresh and relevant today as the day they were first asked.

I think the answers that people give to these two great questions about Jesus will continue to be debated, argued, and written about for centuries to come. This is in part because the reality behind these questions lies well beyond this universe and will never ever have definitive answers on this side of reality. Yet, human pride being what it is, we will not live by faith, but seek to be like gods in our knowing.

Furthermore, the answers to Jesus' questions were never meant, if we look closely at the questions and their context, to be the topics of theological debates, systematic theologies, philosophical explanations, or even institutional doctrines. Folks, given the social norms, Jesus

was looking for an answer about himself and his identity from the people and his disciples given his new and evolving role and context.

Jesus was not doing a tongue-in-cheek PR check on his effectiveness. Thus, the people, the Jews, and Jesus' disciples had to answer who Jesus was not only for them but for him. Jesus is literally asking, "Who am I?" Likewise, we must also ask, who Jesus is for our collective and personal lives, not how does he fit into some ancient or modern metaphysical paradigms that we all can agree on.

Having said all that, now let's turn to our Markan scriptures about the Transfiguration and what they tell us about who Jesus was. Just prior to the Transfiguration, Jesus made his first prediction of his impending death. Peter opposes him and is rebuked. Jesus then goes up on a high place, reminiscent of Moses going up on Mt. Sinai, taking Peter, James, and John with him. While on the mountaintop, these apostles see an amazing site - Jesus begins to glow, not unlike the traditions about Moses on Mt. Sinai. (One would wonder if the high place could have been somewhere like Sandia or Los Alamos.)

There appear two others with Jesus. How these others were identified as Elijah and Moses we do not know. The point is that in this meeting with Jesus, we have Moses the great Law Giver and Elijah, a great prophet, who had been rejected by Israel as Jesus was about to be. We do not know what this trio discussed. However, their appearances affirmed Jesus' status as a great prophet and a new law giver in the minds of Mark's audiences. I don't think this registered fully with Peter, James, and John, however as we later learn.

Therefore, the crux of these passages for the first readers would have been who is Jesus, remembering Mark is writing long after the events and during turbulent times, either during the Great Jewish rebellion or just afterwards in Rome. Was this one whom Christians venerated just a crucified Jewish rebel/thief and thus, his followers were potential rebels and trouble makers? Or, was he a true divine, a son of a god, whom even his own people didn't recognize or understand?

As Jesus and the Apostles leave the high place, Peter wants to commemorate the Transfiguration by erecting three booths in keeping with the Feast of Tabernacles, the seven days of commemorating God's guidance and provisioning of Israel in the desert under Moses' leadership. Jesus sees that these guys are terrified and doesn't know what to say to comfort them. As if on cue to Jesus' loss for words, something even more frightening happens - they hear the voice of God.

Jesus tells the Apostles, particularly Peter, to be quiet about this event until after his resurrection. Why? Well, because it is obvious that Peter didn't really understand what was going on or, possibly, he couldn't understand until after Jesus' resurrection. Another possibility was that making such an event known to the public at the time would have placed Jesus, just as his being labeled the Messiah, in a great honor competition with Israel's leaders. This would have prematurely curtailed what was left for him to do in en route to or in Jerusalem. Keep in mind we are reading this story post resurrection. Not only do the apostles not understand who Jesus is, but later we learn that they did not listen to a word God said.

Twice in Mark's Gospel God speaks: once at Jesus' baptism telling only him and the eavesdropping readers and listeners that Jesus in his act of obedience in baptism is declared the Beloved Son in whom God is pleased. The second time is in our scriptures today, when God affirms Jesus's honor standing among Israel's prophets by identifying him as the Beloved Son of God for the benefit of Peter, James, and John. This fact, as I said, is something we the readers and listeners have known all along.

God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Please note that neither God nor Mark attempt to answer the questions of Jesus' metaphysical nature as God's son for his church,

our theologies, or our Christologies today. Mark's clearest and most consistent understandings, per our best and earliest documents, is that Jesus is a man, imbued with power from on high, with a divine purpose, who obeys his sense of God's call as a devoted and obedient son even unto death. At the time, a person being called a son of God among the Jews had more to do with their obedience to God's will than with biology, natural or supernatural.

Over the years, as I have listened to people's convoluted squabbling over who Jesus was and how he was what he was, I have often wanted to say shut up with the metaphysical stuff because (a) you don't know what you are talking about, and (b) we cannot understand all that is going on in Jesus as the Christ this side of reality. So, stay with what we know incontrovertibly - Jesus was a man, an Aramaic Jew from Galilee, who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, according to his Jewish understandings of such things. Therefore, just listen to the man, will ya! Listen to the Beloved of God.

I think what is important is not so much our understanding of Jesus' nature as a source of his honor, power, and authority in Mark, but rather that we should listen to him. That is God's command in Mark's Gospel to Jesus' disciples and Mark's disciple audience. Listen when Jesus tells us the kingdom of God has come near us in the Good News of his teachings and witness. The dynamics of this Good News is God's movement of love toward us and our response, in kind, by loving, God, self, and neighbor and not in our pathetic intellectual attempts to approach or second guess God.

Therefore, hear Jesus predict his death as a natural outcome of his or any disciple, who dares confront human social, religious, political, or economic institutions with God's message of love. Recognize that his death and resurrection abate our own ultimate concerns and debilitating anxieties about death. The Apostle Paul writing much earlier than Mark addressed these concerns:

<sup>54b</sup> "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

<sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory?"

Where, O death, is your sting?"

<sup>58</sup> Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:54b, 55, and 58 (NRSVA)

People who can hear, listen to him, and receive the kingdom of God where ever you are whenever you are as a trusting child. Listen to him; follow him on the way to the coming fullness of God's kingdom wherein all life will be blessed.

Therefore, Christians let us cease with all our little preoccupations, such as defining and debating the metaphysical nature of Jesus and how he did what he did as the Christ as well as our concerns over death. We have larger issues to deal with; we got Jesus things to do - such as playing our parts in building the Kingdom of God on earth within the moral, ethical, and spiritual framework of love. To this end, let us listen to Jesus because in his words and ways are the power of God's truth unto salvation, restoration for the world and our place in it. Listen to him. Please, listen to him, will you; if not for the world, for your own sake.

And, oh, by-the-way, in the final analysis, you must, we must, answer those questions about who Jesus is for ourselves and what it means for him to be the Beloved Son of God. Folks, Jesus is asking you, us, "Who am I?" Who am I in your life, your community of faith, and your worlds? We can't pass this buck onto history, philosophy, or to the theologians. We must

answer it for ourselves out of our experiences of the holy, whether as individuals or as a community of faith. Who is this Jesus, Beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased?

---

Bibliography

Malina Bruce J and Jerome H. Neyrey. "First-Century Personality: Dyadic, Not Individual." *The Social World of Luke-Acts, Models for Interpretation*, Jerome H. Neyrey, editor. Hendrickson Publishers, 1991.

Perkins, Pheme. *The Gospel of Mark, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. VIII of the *New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994, online, Ministry Matters.com.