

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 8:27-38

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The setting of this story is very important. The villages of Caesarea Philippi were on the very northern boundary of Israel in Jesus' day, in the area that is now part of the Golan Heights. It was a disputed area then; it is even more disputed now. It was at the border between Jews and Gentiles, between Jewish territory and Gentile territory on the other side.

It is there that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The tone of Jesus' question here is very open-ended. It is a setup for what is to follow. The disciples' reply is the answer of students who were trying to give the right answer. They are reporting to him what the people say about him. He then asks them a direct question, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter responds with a confession, "You are the Messiah."

This is the second time in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus has been named as the Messiah. The first is at the very beginning where Mark, the storyteller, says, "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ," that is Jesus, the Messiah. Peter is now openly and directly identifying what has been implicit throughout the whole story up until this point. Jesus is, indeed, the one who Mark identifies at the beginning as the Messiah.

Jesus' response is to order them sternly to tell no one about him. The sternness of Jesus' response there is very important in the telling of this story. It is ambiguous how the passion prophecy here should be told. It may be that it is simply factual. But it may be also that the storyteller's shock and dismay at this prophecy is communicated in the tone of what he says: "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected and be killed, and after three days to rise again." To some degree I think it is important to recognize what a shock this is in the story. There is nothing that prepares the listeners for this. In one way or another the storyteller has to express some degree of surprise at this shocking prophecy.

Peter's response reflects that shock. The relationship with Peter here needs to be quite positive—"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him"—so that Jesus' response is a response to the listeners who can identify with Peter. Peter is saying, in effect, "This cannot happen to you! No! Absolutely not!" But Jesus then rebukes Peter in the strongest possible terms. Don't hesitate to tell this with a high degree of confrontation: "Get behind me Satan." This does not necessarily mean that Jesus is angry at Peter. It may only be that he is simply wanting him to recognize what a radically wrong thing he has done in rebuking him and that it is very important for him to undergo this suffering, this passion, this death. Jesus understands that not to accept this prophecy constitutes thinking about human things rather than divine things.

Jesus then calls the crowd and addresses all of them. This address to the crowd includes your listeners, so you want to address all of your listeners as the crowd with the disciples when you say: "If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The expectation of the Messiah was that the Messiah would recruit an army who would follow him into battle. What Jesus says to them is in total contrast. He is saying that if you want to become my followers don't take up your sword and think that you're going to be victorious. Rather, deny yourself and take up your cross. Be willing to die for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

What is at stake here is the willingness to lose your life. Those who save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save them. The promise is that those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel will find life. The greatest profit is to lose your life for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The tone is one of Jesus instructing his disciple's passion about this way of nonviolent resistance to evil as the way of his followers. This is a radically new stage in the Gospel story when both the definition of Jesus' role and of what it means to be his followers is redefined from normal expectations. Then as now, it is easier to recruit young men to join an army than a band of non-violent disciples.