

DATE: August 23rd, 2026
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:13-20
THEME: The power of Jesus' name lies in the struggle to continually try to understand who Jesus is.
SUBJECT: Christology
TITLE: Who is Jesus? ("Crossing Over" series #3)

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How shall we understand Jesus today?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Third of a three-week series: "Crossing Over". We've journeyed with the disciples and Jesus over a small northern stretch of the Sea of Galilee and then travelled to the edge of the Mediterranean Sea where we met our first Gentile in Matthew's gospel. Today, we walk with the group along the Way to a region called Caesarea Philippi as we cross over about 30 - 40 miles of land. We're physically moving around, but we're also on a spiritual journey of understanding who we are in relation to others, particularly those on the margins and across borders. As we interact with other cultures and views, today we pause to ask: Who is Jesus?

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that I've written dates in my Bible that estimate when events took place in Matthew's gospel. If Jesus' public ministry began in the fall of 26, we are now in the summer of 29. Jesus is probably just a few months from being executed. I mention this because he has probably taught the disciples most of what he wants them to know, and yet we're only about halfway through the book of Matthew. The whole book itself pivots on last week's story of Jesus' interaction with the woman in Canaan in gentile territory. Before that, Jesus focused on ministry among the Jews.

After that, Jesus focuses on ministry among gentiles. Even so, our story today comes right after his interaction with some Pharisees and Sadducees, two influential and competing religious groups within the Jewish faith. Jesus wraps up that scene with a warning to be on guard against the “yeast” (corruption, false teaching) of each of these groups. After that, Jesus returns his focus on gentiles as he and the disciples arrive in a place called Caesarea Philippi.

Has anyone ever been to the region of Caesarea Philippi? It lies at the base of Mt. Hermon, the highest peak in the land of Palestine. Rivers and streams from mountain run-off create a lush, jungle-like river canyon that features a great waterfall. Beautiful as it is, it was seen as an “evil” place by ancient Jews and Christians because it was a center of pagan, Greco-Roman and Canaanite worship. The “gates of hell” (underworld) that Jesus mentions is actually a physical place: a deep and seemingly bottomless spring that came from a cave opening that’s still there today. Many ancients believed that this cave and bottomless spring was a portal to the underworld through which gods traveled back and forth. So, while Caesarea Philippi is among the most fertile and flourishing places in the region, it was a place to be avoided by Jews and early Christians because of its association with non-Jewish religions.

It was at this time and in this place that Jesus asked his disciples a very important question. Two actually. First, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” After rattling off a list of well-known prophets (John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah) — perhaps with the aim of warming them up for the main question — Jesus then asks: “Who do YOU say that I am?” That’s what I want to focus on today. Who do you say that Jesus is?

I've travelled to a few places outside the U.S.: Nicaragua, Ghana, Europe, Mexico, the Philippines. I know that many of you have also spent time outside this country; some have spent significant time abroad. One thing that has always struck me is the way many people in some of those places talk about God and how willing they are to talk about God. Posters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus can be seen on buses, store fronts and laundromats all over Guadalajara. And I've entered into conversations about Jesus quite comfortably with many people in Accra and Manila. Here in our country, however, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, we are much more guarded and careful about how we talk about our faith. Perhaps we've taken our cue from the Constitution. While it makes no specific statement about "separation of church and state," the Constitution does say: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In short, it's fine to hold any religious belief ... or to hold no religious belief. But rather than risk talking about our faith in an inappropriate setting or in a way that would offend someone, many choose not to talk about their faith at all.

It gets more complicated. Jessica Grose offered her take in the title of an article she wrote in the New York Times a few years ago, *Christianity's Got a Branding Problem* (New York Times, May 10, 2023). One person that Grose interviewed in her article said, "I no longer attend services, nor want to. I am simply too angry at what so-called Christians are doing to our children and society." The U.S. wasn't established as a Christian nation (in 1787) and it still isn't a Christian nation, but many people want to overrule the 'establishment clause' and turn the U.S. into a Christian nation that many of us wouldn't recognize. I've heard friends say that they're so uncomfortable with the

way Christian beliefs are portrayed in our culture that they're reluctant to talk about Jesus, lest people think they hold the same beliefs as those who are quite vocal about them. And because some seem interested in converting me, I just avoid the whole conversation altogether. Is it possible to have a meaningful conversation about Jesus with a stranger without any concern that conversion is part of the equation? Then there are ex-vangelicals who have been hurt by the evangelical tradition but who are still committed to the Way of Jesus. They may be asking: Who am I apart from my Evangelical upbringing? What should I toss out? What can I keep? How do I talk about Jesus? Can I still talk about Jesus or should I just keep Jesus to myself? Maybe I'll just go take a walk in the woods.

"Who do you say that I am?" asked Jesus. Impetuous Simon blurts out, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Did he get it right? Jesus in Matthew's gospel seems to think so. He even gives Simon a new name for his A+ answer: Peter, the Rock. [Side note: the term in Matthew for 'rock' is 'Petros' which can also be translated 'rocky.' And, since Peter was the son of Jonah (John), we could call him Rocky Johnson.] So 'ol Rocky may be onto something.

Marcus Borg said that Jesus was a healer, sage and prophet (*Jesus: The Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015.) Others say he's their Lord and Savior. Some say he was a misunderstood Jew or that he was a reluctant messiah. Still others wonder if Jesus existed at all.

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. Perhaps sometime around the summer of 28, nearly two years into Jesus' public ministry, John the Baptist asked from prison: "Are you the one that is to come? Or should we wait for another?" John was probably

thinking, “If I’m going to suffer this much to prepare your way, I want to know it’s worth it.” Jesus’ response: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them!” (Matthew 11:3b-5) I’ve wondered if that answer actually satisfied the Baptist. Scripture doesn’t say.

Jesus does offer slightly clearer answers to his own question in other gospels. He said, “I and God are one.” When the high priest asks Jesus in Mark 14 if he is the Messiah, Jesus replies, “I am.” He also calls himself the Son of Man many times. By using this term, he affirmed that he was fully human, as we all are. But he was also identifying with the “exalted figure” in Daniel 7. Daniel tells about his vision: “... there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days (God) and was led into God’s presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples [and] nations of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14). Those with ears to hear would have made this connection. Jesus is much more careful about throwing around the term “Son of God.” He used it once to refer to himself (John 10:36), though he accepted and affirmed the title several times when others used it to refer to him (Luke 3:22, Mark 14:61-61, John 20:31).

But Jesus never says outright, “I am God” in any of the gospels. John’s account offers the clearest description of Jesus’ identity, however. John still keeps things a little vague, though: “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). “I am the bread of life (Jn 6:35),” “I am the light of the world (Jn 8:12),” and “I am the way and the truth and the life

(Jn 14:6).” All of these well-known self-pronouncements come from John’s gospel which is important because the book of John was the last of the four gospels in our Bibles to be written - sometime between 90 and 100 CE. By then, there were very few firsthand eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry still around; Christianity was quickly moving beyond the first generation of apostles into the second generation. The needs of the still fledgling faith were changing and, as transitions often require, they likely needed a new model. John’s depiction of Jesus is different from the other three gospels for that reason. What worked for people just a few years earlier no longer rang true as new believers joined the church AND as the church faced increasing persecution from both Jews and Romans. This new generation needed new inspiration. John’s community was having an identity crisis — it was truly a transitional moment and they were seeking to proclaim a ‘Jesus’ that they could both relate to and put their trust in.

Is there a ‘Jesus’ that you can relate to and put your trust in? Is he the same for you as he was 5, 10, 20 years ago? Has your life changed — has society changed — in a way that has caused you to re-evaluate your understanding of Jesus and your relationship with Jesus? Even Jesus himself seemed reluctant to put a fine point on his own identity in the gospels, and maybe that’s by design. If he had put all doubt to rest and said outright, “I am God, A) he probably wouldn’t have survived to the age of ~33 and B) he would have had at least as many, if not more, detractors. And C), a spoon-fed, static identity might not have inspired 20 centuries of belief. The fact that people have continued to wrestle with who Jesus is for 2000 years is precisely why the Christian faith is still around. Is Jesus the Christ, the son of the Living God? Yes. Is he a healer, sage and prophet? Yes. Is he Lord and Savior? Yes. All of these. But beyond

what names we may use for Christ, Jesus invites us first and foremost into relationship and to proclaim with Rocky Johnson, “You are the Messiah, the Firstborn of the living God.” Perhaps Jesus called Simon blessed not because Simon got his facts correct, but because Simon had begun to find his way, maybe accidentally, by identifying his relationship to the Messiah. On that rock solid foundation of relationship, the Church stands and so can we.

And if we’re talking about identity, we never need to question the name that God calls us. We make mistakes, we fall short, we may struggle to forgive and be forgiven. But God calls each one of us by name through all the challenges and difficulties of life. That name: Beloved.

Let’s pray: Anointed One (Christ), the Lord Saves (Jesus), God With Us (Immanuel), Alpha and Omega, Son of God, Son of Humanity, Word, Bread of Life, Star of the Morning, Truth, Life, Vine, Redeemer, Prince of Peace, Mediator, Fountain of Living Waters, Lion, I Am, Chief Cornerstone, Bridegroom, Good Shepherd — give us courage to wrestle and give us the confidence to know that, though we may not fully understand who you are, we know enough to put our trust in you and in your unfailing love. Amen.