

**It's no coincidence that Caesarea Philippi is the backdrop for this pivotal episode in all three of the gospels that tell this story.**

Caesarea Philippi was a major city in a region that had seen the rise and fall of temples and sacred grottos dedicated to many mythic figures; and in recent times had seen Herod the Great erect a temple to honor Augustus Caesar.<sup>1</sup>

**So when Jesus chooses this place to ask his disciples the weighted question: WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? He's doing so on soil that has witnessed a number of different FRAMING STORIES over the course of centuries.**

**What is a FRAMING STORY? It's the story we tell ourselves about ourselves that answers WHERE WE CAME FROM, WHO WE ARE and WHAT WE VALUE.**

**It's the overarching narrative that takes collective experiences and places them within a system that gives them meaning.**

**Example: For most of the past five centuries the broad strokes of America's FRAMING STORY has included elements like these:**

- Pilgrims yearning for religious freedom fled their homes in the Old World to begin anew on the unsoiled terrain of the New World.
- When the grasping hands of the British Empire sought to assert control over New World commerce through taxation without representation, our forefather's rebelled.
- From the ashes of the Revolutionary War, a new nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," was born.
- The Founders' vision for democratic government, economic prosperity, and the rights of individuals resulted in the formation of institutions in which these "inalienable rights" have been enshrined.
- Flawed though it may be, America is the one place in the world where rags to riches dreams can come true, where underdogs are still championed, and where sacrifice for the sake of hallowed principles of freedom remains the order of the day.

**The story we've told ourselves about ourselves.**

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark*. (New York: St. Martins, 1963.) Cited in *Binding the Strong Man*, 241.

**But in recent decades this STORY has, more and more, been called into question.**

**Inconvenient truths from American history—such as the extermination of the Native communities, the institution of chattel slavery, the belief in white supremacy, the suppression of women—which until recently have been covered up, downplayed, side-stepped, discarded, or only partially acknowledged—are emerging into the light of day to challenge the FRAMING STORY America has told itself.**

**The MeToo movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the September 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary this weekend—to name a few—remind us that new experiences (and newly visible ones) continue to challenge, complicate, and call into question our understanding of what it means to be an AMERICAN.**

**Here's where I'm going: Every society, every tribe, every people, every culture has its own FRAMING STORY and a mechanism by which it asserts its point of view.**

And when voices emerge to challenge the validity of that FRAMING STORY or to poke holes in it, those voices run the risk of being discredited, dismissed, persecuted, incarcerated, and, if need be, executed.

**When Jesus began his ministry, ROME OWNED the FRAMING STORY for the Western world.**

**Its iron-fisted central leadership, cutting edge engineering, and integrated system of transportation—all supported by a common Greek tongue and enforced by a crack military—enabled Rome to swallow up the lesser stories of lesser peoples.**

**And Rome perfected a ruthlessly effective means for dealing with those who raised their voices against it. It was called CRUCIFIXION.**

“Imperial...forces would erect crosses conspicuously on hillsides near well-traveled roads near major cities of the empire...impaling rebels like insects on pins for public view.”<sup>2</sup>

**One glance at a cross and its victim would cure almost anyone of the impulse to challenge the status quo of the *PAX ROMANA*.<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. Thomas Nelson, 2007. Page 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

**When Jesus stands with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi within sight of a temple extolling the EMPIRE’S FRAMING STORY, he asks them first:**

**WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?**

That is: What FRAME are people placing me in?

**Then he sharpens the question and makes it inescapably personal:**

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?**

That is, which FRAME will you orient your lives around?

**At first blush, Peter’s answer seems like the right one:**

**YOU ARE THE MESSIAH! THE ANOINTED ONE OF GOD!**

But when Jesus starts fleshing out the job description, attaching new content to what MESSIAH means, Peter slams on the brakes.

**It turns out Peter is operating under the influence of a different FRAMING STORY than that of Jesus, a story in which suffering, rejection, denial, and crucifixion **HAVE NO PLACE**.**

In his book EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE: JESUS, GLOBAL CRISES, AND A REVOLUTION OF HOPE, **Brian McLaren** points to evidence that OUR WORLD’S DOMINANT FRAMING STORY IS FAILING. Economic systems, environmental systems, equity systems, security systems—they’re all breaking down.

**“Without altering our framing story,”** writes McLaren, **“we will never solve the crises”** that hold the world captive.<sup>4</sup>

**And this is where Jesus comes in.**

**When Jesus proclaims the nearness of God’s reign he isn’t proclaiming one more in a long line of esoteric religious concepts. He’s proclaiming an alternative to Empire.**

The Good News he proclaims is that GOD—NOT CAESAR—IS LORD, and that we can live in relation to God and God’s love rather than Caesar and Caesar’s power.<sup>5</sup>

**When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him on THE WAY, he’s inviting them to live under the power of THIS FRAMING STORY.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 72.

<sup>5</sup> McLaren, page 90.

**And when he asks, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? he is finding out to what degree they have begun to make this new frame their own.**

**Peter thought he knew, but his insight was incomplete.**

Only after the resurrection does the full frame of what Jesus taught and lived come into focus for Peter and other disciples, as they experience the Spirit's power transforming them from a fearful band of fugitives into an empowered and empowering movement whose ethic, built upon the redemptive love and radical inclusion of their founder, changes the face of the Empire forever.

**And what about you? What framing story are you living your life within?**

**And if it's Jesus who founds your framing story—his WAY that anchors life and hope for you, are you ready to say that OUT LOUD? To articulate it publicly?**

**To confess it, even without knowing the full scope of where it might take you?**

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?**

**With so many competing FRAMES vying for our hearts and our allegiance, is his version of the truth just one more among many?**

**Or is it the central, overarching story—the one by which all others are judged?**

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?**

Amen.