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Pentecost 19B
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Mark 8:27-38 part 1 of 2

A NEW FRAME

It's no coincidence that Caesaria Philippi is the backdrop for this turning point Q & A in all three of the gospels that tell this story. Caesaria Philippi was a major Hellenistic city which controlled an extensive territory and had enough economic clout that it even coined its own money.[1]

Through the ages this region had seen the rise and fall of temples and sacred grottos associated with a variety mythological figures and gods, and in recent times had seen Herod the Great erect a temple to honor Augustus Caesar.[2]

So when Jesus chooses this place and time to ask the weighted question: WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? He does so on soil that had witnessed a number of what we might call **FRAMING STORIES** over the course of centuries.

And the FRAMING STORY that was asserting itself at that moment was that of the Roman Empire.

What is a FRAMING STORY? It is that overarching narrative (meta-narrative) that provides cultures with a framework in which they can comprehend reality. A FRAMING STORY takes the experiences of human beings within a given culture, organizes them, and places them within a system that gives meaning.

So, for example, the FRAMING STORY of America includes the following elements:

- Pilgrims yearning for religious freedom fled their homes in the Old World to begin anew on the unsoiled terrain of the New World.
- In response to the grasping hands of Empire (in this case, British), which sought to assert continuing control over New World commerce through taxation without representation, the colonists 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.
- A new 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.
- America, blessed by God, remains the one place in the world where rags to riches dreams can come true, where the underdog is still championed, where sacrifice for the sake of hallowed principles of freedom continues as the order of the day.

Now there are many more pieces, themes, and details to this FRAMING STORY of America, of course, including some, like the extermination of the Native inhabitants of these shores, which have been downplayed, covered up, discarded or, in the case of slavery, only partially woven into the fabric of that frame.

And the anniversary of 9/11 this week reminds us that new experiences continue to add detail and to challenge, complicate, and deepen our understanding of what it means to be an AMERICAN…

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[1] A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.) Quoted in Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 241.
[2] Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark.* (New York: St. Martins, 1963.) Cited in *Binding the Strong Man*, 241.

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Historians have plenty to argue about when it comes to the details of our nation's **FRAMING STORY**, but I think we can all recognize that basic outline.

The rhetoric we hear day in and day out from politicians, scholars, media outlets, and other voices in the public square, is an ongoing argument over which group has the deepest and the truest connection to this dominant FRAMING STORY.

Whoever wins that contest wins the right to assert its agenda—at least until the next election!

So we've had this crazy discourse on healthcare, with town hall forums turning into ugly shouting matches; and the spectacle of a US congressman calling the President a liar before a joint session of congress; and we've seen the old "SOCIALIST" label dusted off and thrown back into the ring, reviving memories of the Cold War; and we've seen outlandish and fear-based claims about BIG BROTHER making end of life decisions for us.

All of this conversation (which seems more like conflagration than conversation at times) is taking place under the umbrella of the overarching FRAMING STORY of what America is about.

In fact, the public discourse around each and every one of the countless issues facing our country **has direct ties to that FRAMING STORY.**

Here's my point: Every society, every culture has its own FRAMING STORY, and the means by which it asserts its point of view, its vision, its understanding of how the world works (or ought to).

And when voices emerge to challenge the validity of that FRAMING STORY or to poke holes in it, those voices, depending on a society's capacity for dissent, may be discredited, dismissed, persecuted, imprisoned, and sometimes, executed.

At the time Jesus' ministry began, Rome owned the FRAMING STORY for the western world.

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

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

> "Imperial security forces would erect crosses conspicuously on hillsides near well-traveled roads near major cities of the empire. By impaling rebels like insects on pins for public view, security forces would demonstrate both the absolute and fearsome power of the empire the complete pathetic powerlessness…of the would be insurrectionists."[3]

One glance at a cross and its victim, would cure almost anyone of the impulse to challenge the status quo of the *pax Romana*.[4]

[3] Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. Thomas Nelson, 2007. Page 87.
[4] Ibid.

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When Jesus stood there at Caesaria Philippi in the company of his followers and within site of a temple extolling the ROMAN EMPIRE'S FRAMING STORY, with the vestiges of other, more ancient framing stories scattered around him, he asked his disciples first,

WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? That is: What FRAME are people placing me in?

And then he sharpened the question and made it inescapably personal:

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

WHAT FRAMING STORY, Jesus asks, WILL YOU ORIENT YOUR LIVES AROUND?
Peter's answer seemed like the right one: YOU ARE THE MESSIAH! THE CHRIST! THE ANOINTED ONE OF GOD!

But as soon as Jesus started to attach content to that TITLE, to flesh out the job description, Peter slammed on the brakes. It turns out that while Peter THOUGHT he understood what Jesus was up to, Peter was operating under the influence of a different FRAMING STORY than that of Jesus, a framing story in which suffering, rejection, denial, and crucifixion had NO PLACE.

Jesus was announcing a whole new FRAME for understanding what God was up to in the world and what we are here for, and this new wine just couldn't be accommodated by old wineskins.

In his book EVERTHING MUST CHANGE: JESUS, GLOBAL CRISES, AND A REVOLUTION OF HOPE, **Brian McLaren** cites ample 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," McLaren writes, "we will never successfully solve the crises" that hold the world captive.[5]

And that's where Jesus comes in. In the first chapter of Mark, after his sojourn in the desert, Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying,

THE TIME IS FULFILLED, THE REIGN OF GOD IS HERE; ORIENT YOUR LIVES AROUND THIS GOOD NEWS. [Mark 1:14-15, my paraphrase]

Here's the point: When Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God's kingdom he wasn't proclaiming one more in a long line of esoteric religious concepts. He was proclaiming an **alternative to empire**.

DON'T ALLOW YOUR LIVES TO BE FRAMED BY THE NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE; SITUATE YOURSELVES IN A DIFFERENT STORY, THE GOOD NEWS THAT GOD, NOT CAESAR, IS LORD, AND WE CAN LIVE IN RELATION TO GOD AND GOD'S LOVE RATHER THAN CAESAR AND CAESAR'S POWER.[6]

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him on the way, he was inviting them to learn and to live under the power of a framing story that was different than any other competing story they had known. And when he asked them, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? he was finding out to what extent they had begun to make that frame their own.

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[5] Ibid, page 72.
[6] Ibid, page 90.

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Peter thought he knew, and to his credit he was ready to pronounce the truth as he knew it.
But the truth as he knew it turned out to be incomplete. Only after the resurrection does the full frame of what Jesus taught and lived come into focus for Peter and the early faith communities.

What about us? What framing story do we live our lives within? The good news of Jesus Christ? Or is there some other framing story that still holds sway?

And if it is Jesus who provides the framing story, are we ready to say it OUT LOUD? To articulate it publicly? To confess it, even though we don't know the full scope of where it might take us?

Sisters & brothers, there is demand in this gospel text! Jesus wants to know where we stand.
Surrounded by the framing stories that populate our lives, vying for our allegiance, is his version of the truth just one more? Or will it become for us the central, overarching story by which all others are judged? **Will we follow him to the place that he is going, or not?**

Shopping for a new home doesn't count until you sign on the dotted line.
You can go back to a house again and again, you can imagine what your life might be like if you lived in that house, you can project where your furniture will go and what colors you'll put on what walls, you can anticipate how your family will fit in the neighborhood, but until you sign the papers and commit yourself in a concrete and specific way, all of that imagining remains a flight of fancy.

The same is true for becoming apprenticed to Jesus and committing ourselves to his way of being in the world. We can imagine what being a disciple might be like, we can project what giving ourselves to his way of living in the world might look like, we can study his stories and admire his abilities as a healer and be drawn to his inclusive nature, but **until we confess that he, and no other, is our Lord, it's all an exercise in creative imagination.**[7]

The missionary challenge faced by the early church was how to present the saving grace of Christ and the utter scandal of the cross as good news to a world that scoffed at this message.
And the greatest evidence they had to go on was the how that Good News changed lives.

The missionary challenge which faces the church in the 21st century is not much different than that of the 1st century, and the strategy is the same. **If the Good News we proclaim is to have significance in a post-Christian America, we must be willing share with others how Christ is active in our lives and in our community.**

Unless we find ways of sharing how God's grace in Jesus shapes our lives and values and the practices of our community, unless we purposely live under GOD'S FRAMING STORY as outlined in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we will not be able to help the transforming power of God's FRAMING STORY become a meaningful part of our neighbors' lives.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

It's a question as relevant to us, and as challenging, as it was to Christ's first followers. Amen.

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[7] Karoline Lewis puts it this way: "It is not enough to say what other people think, to repeat what other people say, to accede to popular assent. It is necessary, in fact, to confess it on your own, for yourself, and out loud…Confession demands belief, but it also necessitates articulation—for the sake of one's own affirmations, but also for the sake of that which his confessed. Peter's answer is not only important for what it is, but for what it does." Karoline Lewis, *New Proclamation,* Year B, 2009, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) p. 200.