
The Messiah Among the Gods

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 19 – Year B

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?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” Mark 8:27–29

During my pilgrimage to Israel last spring, I was excited to visit a remote place where not many other pilgrims go. It is way up north, way out of the way—still in Israel, but at the broad base of Mount Hermon in Lebanon, and only forty miles from Damascus, Syria. It is not easy to get there. Tourist buses don’t like to visit, because the area lacks the usual amenities, like a bustling souvenir shop. Our guide rather reluctantly took us there, but she advised against its bathrooms.

The place is Caesarea Philippi, or at least the area around that ancient and now mostly forgotten city. But at the time of Jesus, the area was well known as a sacred place. The water which tumbles out of the rock springs there, originating from Mount Hermon, becomes one of the sources of the Jordan River itself.

At the time of Jesus, the place was not very Jewish at all. Previously, the area had contained a shrine to the Canaanite gods, Baal-Gad, and Baal-Hermon. By the first century, a temple dedicated to the Greek god, Pan, had been carved into the rock. You can still see the remnants of that temple dedicated to Pan, the Greek god of the woods and deserted places, and god of flocks and shepherds. Its name was Paneas, or Baniyas, before Herod the Great named it Caesarea Philippi. No, it was not a very Jewish place at all. In fact, it was quite pluralistic in its recognition of all sorts of gods.

But, according to Mark’s gospel, this is the place—Caesarea Philippi, Baniyas, the place of springs—this is the place where Jesus withdrew in order to ask his famous question, “Who do you say that I am?”

He travelled to a well-known religious place. A place filled with the attractions and allures of many other religions and gods. In today’s terms, I suppose it would be like going into the spirituality section of your local bookstore, amid all the books on the latest spiritual self-help, and asking, “Who do you say that I am?”

Now, I must admit that I find God, I find the Holy, amidst many, many other religions. I enjoy Buddhist meditation, and Jewish observation; and I especially enjoy the sense of the Holy that I get outdoors! I do know God in the waters of flowing springs and in the heights of snow-covered mountains!

Psalm 19, our psalm for this morning, was a favorite psalm of mine this summer. Verse 1 proclaims that “the heavens declare the glory of God.” Verse 5 notes that “In the deep he has set a pavilion for the sun.” I sat on the dock of a lovely lake this past summer, where I noted just that: the sun rejoices like a champion. I often thought of that dock as a pavilion. It is where I observe. I see clouds and nature and glory. I see the Holy.

I enjoy Wisdom, too, the wisdom that the Proverbs writer considers in today’s Old Testament lesson. I find God in literature, in philosophy, and in psychology. I was taken somewhere critical and revelatory, when I read Harper Lee’s first novel, *Go Set A Watchman*, and when I read some of the work of the Jungian analyst, James Hollis.

All these are valid temples of the Holy. God is present in such places.

But Jesus, the Son of Man, the Messiah, tells me a different and distinctive story. In the midst of all this good and true wisdom, in the midst of authentic spiritual discovery, Jesus is something else.

There is a reason Saint Mark places the story in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus travels there to ask, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples answer rather ambiguously, “Oh, some say this, and some say that.” And so Jesus addresses Peter quite directly, “Who do YOU say that I am?” Just as he asks each of us, directly, personally, intimately, “Who do YOU say that I am?” Peter responds authentically, “You are the Messiah.”

There is a reason this question occurs at Banias, at the temple of Pan, in the beautiful forests of northern Israel. Because Jesus realizes that many other temples and ways to God are certainly valid!

But Jesus also realizes that he is different. He is the messiah, the anointed one, and he is anointed in a distinctive and shocking way. To the disciple’s great horror, Jesus is anointed, and appointed, to *suffer*. Yes, as soon as Peter names Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus begins to teach that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed.

This feature of messiahship is disturbing to Peter, and the gospel says that Peter takes Jesus aside to contradict him. So, Jesus responds by rebuking Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” says Jesus to Peter. “You are not setting your mind on divine things, but on earthly things.” Wow. I hope Jesus never tells me that!

The point, however, is dramatic. The way of Jesus is the way of suffering. The moment we look for our spirituality in the sleek self-help section of our local bookstore is the moment we have set our minds on earthly things instead of divine things.

There at Caesarea Philippi, at Banias, in the first century, Jesus distinguished himself from all the other happy gods and spiritual attractions of the day. And Jesus does the same thing today. Finding God in the beauty of creation and in the wisdom of ancient traditions are good things, truly. But finding God in suffering is the way of Jesus. And, in this way, Jesus takes our suffering to God.

By “suffering,” I do not mean something morbid or even violent. The word “suffer” can mean being vulnerable to change. To suffer is to change, and it is change that disturbs most of us. Finding God in the changes of the world is the way of Jesus.

Jesus went on to tell his disciples that day that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it.” He says the same thing to us today, those of us who seek spirituality in life, who seek a higher place, who seek some sense of the true God in a modern world.

The spirituality of Jesus is not self-help. The spirituality of Jesus is self-loss.

And, after three days, he will rise again.

AMEN.

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