



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – June 17, 2007    Who Do You Say That I Am?  
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## Joshua 24:14-15

*14 Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup>Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'*

## Matthew 16:13-18

*13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."*

"Choose this day whom you will serve." "But who do you say that I am?" Both of today's Scripture readings are about crises of decision. They're not about the kind of inconsequential decisions we make dozens of times each day; and they're not about the kind of "someday" decisions we can mull over and put off day after day and week after week. They're about the kind of questions that come out of nowhere to strike at the center of our identity. They're about the kind of questions that demand an immediate, personal commitment: yes or no, in or out, up or down.

My first crisis of decision, or at least the first one I can remember, came when I was just eight years old. My Mom was driving us through the South on one of our periodic pilgrimages to visit the Southern half of our family. As usual, the first stop was Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where my Uncle James was a career Marine.

Now, one of the really cool parts of visiting Uncle James was having access to the Marine facilities, and by far the coolest facility was the swimming pool. You see, this wasn't just any swimming pool, it was a Marine swimming pool - and that meant that down in the deep end there was a training tower - this huge, three-story structure with a flight of stairs up the back you climbed to reach the concrete deck on top. Marines jumped off the tower to simulate jumping from the deck of a sinking ship

Mostly, my older cousin Brit and I just played tag and rough-housed in the shallow end of the pool, but all the while this tower loomed at the other end - silently taunting our courage. Finally, inevitably, Brit dared me to go up to the top of the tower with him. I may have been only eight years old, but already I knew this was one of those dares that separates the men from the boys. Never mind that I was only a boy - there was only one acceptable answer to the dare, and that was "sure, let's go."

Well, when we got up there, we were up there. We could barely ratchet up the courage to even peek over the edge. We couldn't even stand up straight - we were too scared we might lose our balance and topple off. So, we lay down on the slab, gut crawled along the concrete, and pulled our noses over the edge to look down at the water. Whenever we heard Marines coming up the stairs for their jumps, we'd roll over on our backs and lie there casually, pretending we were sunbathing.

Well, this scheme worked for all of about 10 minutes before this big Marine leaned right over us and said, "Boys, this ain't no sunbathing tower. There are two ways down. You take a jump, or you take the stairs, but you take one of them . . . and you take it now."

Now, that's what academics call "precipitating a crisis of decision." In fact, it was a "crisis" in the classic dictionary sense: "1) a crucial or decisive point or situation; 2) a turning point; an unstable condition . . .

involving an impending or abrupt or decisive change; 3) an emotionally stressful event or a traumatic change in a person's life . . . 4) a point in a story or drama when a conflict reaches its highest point and must be resolved." [American Heritage Dictionary, "crisis"]. In our case, you might say it was an "all of the above" crisis; and the crisis was resolved by two little boys jumping, flailing and screaming all the way down into the water.

Jesus precipitates a "crisis of decision" in today's Gospel lesson as well. And, again, it is an "all of the above" crisis of decision for Peter, for each of the disciples, and for every Christian every time we read the story. The stable becomes unstable, complacency gives way to a stressful turning point, and the tension in our stories has to be resolved, one way or the other. Theologian Paul Tillich called this question, the question Jesus asked Peter at Caesarea Philippi, the most momentous question ever asked in history.<sup>1</sup>

To understand how this is so, we need first to understand which question we're talking about, because Jesus asks two questions. Jesus' first question is "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Surely, there's no crisis lurking in this question. As long as we can keep the question in the third person, "who does somebody else say Jesus is?" we remain on stable ground. As long as the question is a question of factual observation (what is somebody else saying?), or historical inquiry (what did people say back then?), or even obedience to authority (what do preachers or teachers say?), none of us are pressed to decisive turning points in our own lives.

But see how quickly Jesus pulls the rug out from under our complacency: he reaches right out to Peter, right out to his disciples, right out to you and me and asks his second question point blank, "But who do you say that I am?" It's the "you" that snags us. It's the "you" that turns up the heat. "But who do you say that I am."

You can almost see each disciple taking a sudden interest in their sandals, each hoping someone else would answer the question and get them all off the hook. You can almost feel your own soul shrinking back, hoping to keep the question at a nice historical distance. But Jesus means the question for each and

every disciple; and Jesus means the question for each and every one of us. Who do you say that Jesus is?

The question asks much more than biographical information. Jesus isn't inventing an early form of "What's My Line?" His question has much more to do with you than it has to do with him. Jesus isn't really the Messiah for you unless he's your Messiah. And he isn't really your Messiah unless he's your Lord and Savior; and he isn't really your Lord and Savior unless he's your Lord of life and your hope for meaning and flourish.

God gave Peter the eyes of faith to see Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God. But what is your answer? Who do you say that Jesus is?

This is the question every single one of us has to answer this morning and every new morning of our lives. And there are only two possible answers in any given day: "Yes, you are my Lord and Savior" or "No, you are not." To say "maybe" is to say "no." To say, "I'll get back to you on that," is to say "no." – at least for this day. There are only two ways through this new day of life: the leap up of "yes" or the stairs back down of "no." Who do you say Jesus is right now?

Now, some of us are inclined to "yes, you are my Lord and Savior" and some of us are inclined to "no, you are not" but almost all of us are united in our aversion to the "right now." Let's face two simple facts about ourselves. We don't much like crises of decision intruding into our lives; and we certainly don't want to cede authority over our lives to another – at least not quite yet.

Most of us have worked hard and sacrificed much to build buffers against crises of decision. Give us half a chance and we'll position ourselves so we're no more exposed to random events (sickness, business reversal, natural catastrophe) or beholden to others (employers, governing boards, government officials) than we have to be. Give us half a chance and we'll answer Jesus' question with a sober, prudent, "that's an interesting question. I really should give that more thought . . . later."

But Jesus isn't asking the question to set up an intellectual sun bathing session. Jesus is asking the question to precipitate a crisis of decision. Jesus is setting the stage for either a courageous leap of faith or

a trudge down the stairs of missed opportunity. Who do you say Jesus is? Today. This morning. Sunday, June 17, 2007 at 8:25 am.

This morning, this new day, I urge you to grasp the nettle of this question firmly. I urge you to consider, really consider three reasons why Christ's question deserves an answer – why you should really want to give an answer - right now. First, every day we say “no” is a “no” day forever; but every day we say “yes” is a “yes” day forever. Second, saying “yes” today makes it easier to say “yes” tomorrow; but saying “no” today makes it even harder to say “yes” tomorrow. And, third, until we say “yes,” we’ll never really know what we have been missing by saying “no.”

First, every day we say “no” is a “no” day forever; but every day we say “yes” is a “yes” day forever. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in Society and Solitude, “No man has learned anything rightly, until he knows that every day is Doomsday.” Or as Albert Camus put it, “I’ll tell you a grand secret, my dear: Don’t wait for Judgment Day – in our life *every* day is judgment day ...” Every day is finished, final, fixed and judged at the end of that day. It was or it was not a day leavened by the love of God – forever.

Perhaps you recall the time when Disney chief Michael Eisner asked Warren Buffet for help improving his image. Eisner wanted to be known for being something other than a cut-throat business man who had called his former partner a "little midget."

Buffet told him life is like an impressionist painting. Everything you do in life is like one small daub of paint on the canvas. A good act is a good daub and a bad act is a bad daub. You can never undo a bad daub, all you can do is to try and put a better daub on with your next stroke. Slowly but surely your actions fill up the canvas of your life, the eternal imprint of your days on earth.

So, how much of our canvas are we going to fill up before we call on Christ, the ultimate "Old Master," to guide our hand? Even if we're down to the last corner of our painting, don't we want that corner to be a masterpiece? How much of our life are we going to let slip by before we say "yes" to Christ? Every day

we say “no” is a “no” day forever; but every day we say “yes” is a “yes” day forever.

Second, saying “yes” today makes it easier to say “yes” tomorrow; but saying “no” today makes it even harder to say “yes” tomorrow. Brit and I were terrified the first time we jumped off that tower; but we were a little less scared when we jumped off the next day; and by the end of the week we were racing off that tower till our arms were black and blue with impact bruises.

In 3rd century Alexandria, a Christian theologian named Origen framed a striking image for our relationship with Christ. (Origen, On First Principles) He pictured Christ as a bright light at the head of a vertical classroom. Each of our souls hovers suspended in the classroom below. Whenever we say "yes" to Jesus, whenever we accept him as our Christ, we turn to him, and the light draws us up, closer and closer to Christ. The closer we approach, the brighter the light, and the easier it is to ascend. But whenever we say "no" to Christ, whenever we decline his lordship over our lives, we turn away from the light, and we slowly sink. And the further we fall away from Christ the dimmer the light, and the harder it becomes to turn back around. Saying “yes” today makes it easier to say “yes” tomorrow; but saying “no” today makes it even harder to say “yes” tomorrow.

Finally, until we say “yes,” we’ll never know what we have been missing by saying “no;” we’ll never know how beautiful life can be with Christ’s help.

There is a story about a father who wanted to encourage his young son's progress on the piano. When he read that Paderewski, the great Polish pianist was performing in town, he quickly bought some tickets so he and his son could attend.

The big night arrived, the father and son found their seats near the front of the hall, and the father fell into a conversation with the person on his right. He never even noticed that his son had slipped away. When the house lights dimmed and the spotlights came up on the Steinway, the father's jaw dropped as he spotted his son sitting on the piano bench, plinking away at “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

The audience roared, the father bolted from his seat, but before he could rescue his son, Paderewski himself

appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. "No, don't quit, keep on playing," he whispered to the boy. And reaching past him with his left hand, the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato. The crowd was spellbound, and the piece concluded to thunderous applause as the boy whispered to Paderewski, "I didn't know I could do that."

That's the power of life lifted by the Spirit of Christ. We are only human, we do not feel worthy or able to achieve our highest aspirations, but by some miracle of grace, Christ whispers in our ear, "don't quit, keep on playing," and as we continue, we are inspired, empowered. And from our halting efforts something wonderful can emerge. How wonderful? Jesus tells Peter that His church, Christ's church on earth, will triumph over the gates of Hades, the very powers of death and division. Until we say "yes" to Christ, we'll never know what we've been missing by saying "no."

Now I don't pretend to be anything more than a spiritual toddler, an earnest but stumbling pilgrim on the way. Some days God has given me the grace to say "yes" the best I can, to take the leap of faith; and some days I stand there looking away, shuffling toward the stairs back down. But I can share this interim report: so far my modest leaps of "yes" have led to exhilarating, God affirming adventures, infinitely more wonderful than trudging down the back stairs of "no." But what is your interim report? Who do you say that Jesus is? **Amen.**

---

1 Paul Tillich, "Thou Art the Christ," Shaking the Foundations ("Then Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea and Philippi, on a road between some unimportant villages, at a time which seems indefinite -- then. But on this road occurred the most important event of human history. It is the most important not only from the point of view of the believer, but also from that of the detached observer of world history. And this indefinite "then" pointed to the most definite and decisive moment in the experience of mankind, the moment in which one man dared to say to another: "Thou art the Christ."")