

Today we are looking at what Jesus teaches us about violence and power, and we will look at God's way in contrast to the world's way. Let us pray.

We talked a few weeks ago of Jesus as teacher. Today we see Jesus using another teaching technique. Jesus takes his disciples on two trips—Brian McLaren calls them field trips. Jesus takes his disciples out of their familiar territory to give them a new perspective and teach them something important. Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. This was an important historical location. Caesarea Philippi is a city of significance. It is a city of religious significance—a place of worship for Baal, the god of the Canaanites—who were living in the Promised Land when the Israelites were led into it. It later became a place of worship for the Greek god Pan and was named Panias. When Alexander the Great expanded his empire, Panias was the site of a major military defeat for those living in the area—a major victory for the Greeks, who then held the entire region until it was lost to the Roman empire, yet another invading empire. This area was given to Herod the Great by the Romans and after Herod died, it passed to Herod Philip, his son. Philip renamed the city Caesarea Philippi—in honor of Caesar who was understood as a god, and also in honor of himself.

This city was reminder of the foreign occupation of the Promised Land—both in its physical make-up, with worship sites to foreign gods, particularly Pan—and in its name, a constant reminder of Roman rule and the god-like nature of Caesar. Since this is not a heavily Jewish area, Jesus and his disciples can actually be together without interruption, without having crowds following them. In this location, with all of these reminders and significance, Jesus teaches his disciples. And in this place, this symbol of Roman authority, Jesus asks perhaps the most important question—who am I?

First, who do people say the Son of Man is? John the Baptist, reincarnated, they answer. Some say a prophet, maybe Jeremiah or even Elijah.

And then Jesus asks, "and who do YOU say that I am?"

And in this place of Roman authority, Simon answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." This is answer of great significance. Messiah in Hebrew, or Christ in the Greek—they mean the same thing. The Messiah, the Savior. We hear this conversation very differently today than Jesus and the disciples would have. We hear it as a statement of faith, of theology, but to Simon and the disciples, this was more a political statement than a religious one. The Jews of Jesus' time understood the Messiah as the liberator, more particularly, the anointed one, anointed as David had been anointed. That is, anointed to be the king. ('anointed, covered in oil') is a title for a savior and liberator of the Jewish people, a messiah is a king or High Priest traditionally anointed with holy anointing oil. However, messiahs were not exclusively Jewish, as the Hebrew Bible refers to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, as a messiah for his decree to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple.

And here, in this place of Roman power, this place of Greek military victory, to declare Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, would be heard as political.

And to declare Jesus as Son of the Living God is a direct contrast to Caesar who claimed to be son of a god—and in turn a god himself. But Jesus is Son of the Living God, not a statue, not an idol—the living God.

Jesus praises Simon for his understanding, for hearing and receiving guidance from God. **Simon will henceforth be Peter, Greek for rock, and “on this rock I will build my church,” says Jesus, “my ekklesia, the assembly of believers, my community of people.”**

In the minds of the disciples, this conversation, this teaching, here in this place of military dominance by the Greeks and the Romans, it would have a political overtone, a political message. Expectations would be at an all-time high.

Soon thereafter, Jesus tells his disciples that he has to go to Jerusalem, and that he will have to suffer and die and then will be raised. With his expectations built up, and undoubtedly excited by Jesus’ praise, Peter does not understand what Jesus is saying. Peter says, “no, this can’t happen,” hearing only the negative and not the resurrection. Perhaps his starting talking, in his mind he starting objecting before Jesus had even finished.

And in a dramatic reversal, Jesus goes from building his church on the Rock, to rebuking Peter as the mouthpiece for Satan. **“Get behind me Satan.” Because Peter doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand that Jesus’ way is not the world’s way.**

Jesus cannot be killed. He cannot be taken and defeated. How is Jesus going to be the conquering King, the Messiah, if he is arrested? If he is killed? This isn’t what Peter understood when he said Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed king, the one who will lead the armed uprising, the one who will conquer over the Romans.

Peter didn’t understand that God’s way is not the human way. As humans we fight violence with violence. We respond to hate with hate and fear with fear. Victory comes with overwhelming force. We beat domination by being better at dominating.

But it doesn’t work and it isn’t God’s way:

Our reading from Isaiah makes this point too—that salvation comes through one who suffers for us, one who is bruised and punished. **“God achieves victory through defeat, glory through shame, strength through weakness, leadership through servanthood, and life through death.”** (McLaren, *We Make the Road By Walking*, 118, Kindle edition)

This paradox of winning through defeat threatens Peter’s understanding of the world. But for such a dramatic change in understanding is exactly why Jesus took his disciples to Philippi, to get them away from the familiar and prepare them for the unprepared.

And this change, this change in understanding how to overcome violence, how to overcome dominance and oppression is fundamental to the kingdom of God.

To save your life you must lose it. Rather than self-interest, your real interest is served by selflessness. Following Jesus means giving up on self, denying yourself. In a world that says look out for number 1, put yourself first, Jesus teaches that we have to give of ourselves to be his follower. And that means we cannot repay evil or violence with more violence.

"Merely to resist evil with evil by hating those who hate us and seeking to destroy them, is actually no resistance at all. It is active and purposeful collaboration in evil that brings the Christian into direct and intimate contact with the same source of evil and hatred which inspires the acts of his enemy. It leads in practice to a denial of Christ and to the service of hatred rather than love."

Thomas Merton

Just three days later, Jesus takes James, John and Peter on another trip—another field trip if you will. This time they go up on a mountain and there, Jesus is met by Elijah and Moses. We call this the Transfiguration, because Jesus was transfigured into his Glory. Surrounded by Moses, the writer of the law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, Jesus outshines them both. Peter, overwhelmed by the glory offers to build three altars or structures to the honor of Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah. And then God speaks: **"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"** Brian McLaren says, **it's as if God is saying, "Moses and Elijah were fine for their time, but my beloved Son Jesus is on another level entirely, revealing my true heart in a unique and unprecedented way. Listen to him!"** (McLaren, 119)

Moses fought for God, and committed violence in God's name. Elijah too committed violence in God's name. But Jesus takes the teachings before him and takes it further—to the heart of God. So even as they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus reminded them of his up-coming death. Even this moment of glory is seen through a victory that comes through death, a resurrection that follows suffering.

In many ways we are like Peter—we know the right words to say, we declare Jesus as Messiah. We declare ourselves followers of Jesus.

And yet, it means something different to us than to God. We want God to answer our prayers for wealth, for political victory, for power. We claim and some can even quote the teachings of Jesus, and yet in the very next breath, put our own interests, our own safety, our own happiness ahead of others, or even . . . at the expense of others.

We forget to love our neighbor as ourselves or we forget who are neighbor is. We forget to love our enemy—or perhaps we simply can't bring ourselves to do it. We hang on to our pain and our need for revenge. Yes, the Lord's prayer even says, forgive us our trespasses, as WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US. Perhaps we are hiding behind that word, that legal term Trespass that we don't use anywhere else in our lives but it means harm, forgive us the harm we have done just as we forgive those who harmed us. Not "grant us revenge God" but instead "forgive." Jesus as our model asked God to forgive

those who crucified him. That is the path Jesus taught, that is how Jesus addressed violence.

But we look to violence and power as the answer. We are attacked, we should attack back, not defend, not protect, but attack. The greatest defense is a **strong offence, we teach, and we don't just mean in sports. But Jesus showed us that God's kingdom comes in self-sacrifice and humbleness and a willingness to be a servant and to think of others first.**

That is the message of the fields trips—one to a place of military defeat where Jesus teaches that yes, he is the Messiah, and like the disciples and like the words of Isaiah we celebrate the victory, we applaud that the savior has come. Victory is ours victory is ours. And it is.

But that means he will be arrested, he will suffer, he will die. And much like Peter **we don't understand. It is devastating. That Jesus much suffer as Isaiah also** teaches, is hard to understand. It is an unsettled world. A world that sees violence as the answer, money as the answer, self-interest and self-preservation as the answer. But those answers are why it is an unsettled world. Because Jesus teaches that violence and power struggles only beget violence and power struggles. But they are defeated through love and love overcomes violence, taking the wind out of its sails, the momentum out of its drive, and restoring life in the resurrection. Because in a moment of darkness and in response to hate and violence, the light of love, the light of God still shines, and especially when it shines through us, then, THEN, victory is ours indeed. Amen.