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Lent: Where are we going?  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
February 25, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 8:27-38

I want to open with a question. If we turned today's gospel reading into a play, would anyone here want to play Peter? Just picture the scene. Jesus is surrounded by the disciples. They are not only his friends, but are also the group that has been following Jesus around. They presumably know Jesus as well as anyone does. Imagine being a part of that group. Imagine hearing those same two questions from Jesus - directed at you as one of the disciples.

The first question is actually pretty easy. Jesus asks, "who do other people say that I am?" Well, that's simple enough. The disciples would have interacted with the local people as they traveled around. They would have heard what the local people had to say about Jesus. Their answer requires only that the disciples report what they have heard in their travels. They didn't have to take a personal stand.

The second question is a lot harder. Jesus asks, "but who do you say that I am?" Wow. That does not just require listening to other people. It requires thought, insight. Moreover, it requires risk. It requires vulnerability. It requires personal commitment. And Peter takes the risk of declaring that he believes that Jesus is the messiah. And Jesus seems to accept that label. But then, Jesus describes what that label means to him. And for Jesus, the label of messiah means a life of service, suffering, rejection, and even his own death.

And that's where the fur starts to fly. Because Peter starts to correct Jesus. And at that point, Jesus calls Peter the devil. What is going on here? Early on in our story Peter says that Jesus is the messiah and 4 verses later, Jesus calls Peter the devil. Someone did not have their morning cup of coffee, that's for sure.

One clue as to what is going on here is embedded in the words that are used. In the translation I used Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan". Does that phrase sound familiar to you? That same phrase is used near the very beginning of the gospels, when

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Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil 3 times. You may remember that after resisting temptation 3 times, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan”. Jesus just used the exact same words on Peter. Was Jesus being tempted again? And if so, what exactly was the temptation?

We need a brief digression.

As you know there are 4 gospels in the New Testament. And there are other gospels - called “non-canonical” that did not make the cut. There are over 35 “official” non-canonical gospels that were not included in the Bible for a variety of reasons. The best known of these is probably the “Gospel of Thomas”. I want to quote from a non-canonical gospel that missed being included in the Bible by about 1600 years. I mean the Gospel according to Tim Rice, sometimes known as the Rock Opera, “Jesus Christ Superstar”.

This reading is from the scene where a group of people are dancing and singing praises to Jesus, and Simon Peter proposes a “better” strategy to Jesus. This scene combines a common view of the Jewish messiah found in the Old Testament with a New Testament understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth was. With some really cool dance moves and a driving rock beat.

I won't sing or dance it - but here's the text:

First, the crowds are singing:

- Christ you know I love you. Did you see, I waved. I believe in you and God so tell me that I'm saved. Jesus, I am with you. Touch me, touch me, Jesus. Jesus I am on your side. Kiss me, kiss me, Jesus.

Then, Simon starts explaining his plan to Jesus. Simon Peter starts with an observation

- Christ, what more do you need to convince you that you've made it and are easily as strong. As the filth from Rome who rape our country and who've terrorized our people for so long.
- There must be over 50,000, screaming love and more for you. And every one of 50,000, would do whatever you asked them to.

and then Simon gives his advice to Jesus on how Jesus' ministry might proceed:

- Keep them yelling their devotion, but add a touch of hate at Rome. You will rise

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to greater power, we will win ourselves a home. You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever.

Then, the dancing stops, and Jesus responds with this:

- Neither you Simon, nor the 50,000, nor the Romans, nor the Jews nor Judas, nor the twelve, nor the priests, nor the scribes nor doomed Jerusalem itself understand what power is, understand what glory is, understand at all.
- If you knew, all that I knew, my poor Jerusalem You'd see the truth, but you close your eyes. While you live, your troubles are many, poor Jerusalem.
- To conquer death you only have to die. You only have to die.

Simon's reaction to Jesus's response is to simply stare blankly at Jesus in confusion and disappointment.

At the time of Jesus, many people, including Jewish people, were living under Roman rule. It was only natural that those people wanted to live under their own rule. It is only natural to think that the way to achieve that freedom is through military force. So Simon is making the very rational, logical suggestion that Jesus had enough followers to attempt a military overthrow of the Roman forces occupying Palestine at the time. That's what the coming messiah was supposed to do. The messiah predicted in the Jewish Bible was expected to bring political and economic freedom to the people through military force.

But Simon saw a problem. Simon recognized Jesus as this coming messiah, but Simon had come to realize that Jesus was missing something. That missing ingredient - according to Simon - was for Jesus to inject some hatred of Rome into his teachings. To get his followers all fired up for a military conflict with Rome. Preaching love was not going to bring the social transformation that Simon wanted to see.

Simon was logical. He was rational. But he did not understand that hate and love are different messages. And in the gospel according to Tim Rice, Jesus tells Simon bluntly that Simon has missed the point. Simon was looking for a military messiah. Jesus is not that messiah.

Now back to the conventional Bible.

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The fact that Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, satan” suggests that Jesus was tempted by the idea of being a military messiah. Clearly, Jesus could have done that if he had wanted to! The strong words from Jesus tell us that Jesus felt a very real temptation to be a military messiah. But Jesus had something else in mind for his ministry, which was about love, peace, healing, and vulnerability. Jesus did not care about power in the normal sense that we use that word. Jesus preached peace.

So what does this have to do with us? How are we drawn into this conversation? What do we think of this tension between a military messiah and a messiah of peace?

Instead of going there right now, I want to take it in a different direction. Because I think that we face the same decision today. Well, not the option to amass military power - I doubt that is really an option for anyone who is hearing my voice today.

But the underlying narrative running through all this is that Jesus had to make a choice. And that choice was around Jesus’s identity. He had to choose what sort of messiah he was going to be. And I agree with Peter that if Jesus had wanted to be a military messiah, he could have pulled it off. 50,000 crazed people can do a lot! Jesus however consciously chose a different path. The path of peace.

And here at Chapel in the Park United Church we are invited into the same choice. A choice about our identity. We get to choose what it means to be “Chapel in the Park United Church” in 2024. We get to decide who we want to be.

Jesus was tempted with an image of a messiah that comes from expectations from his past. But Jesus chose to become a new type of messiah.

I think it’s the same for us. When I just said that we can choose who we want to be in 2024, I’m sure that at least some of us thought that we want to recreate the church from the past - full pews, a large Sunday School, a big choir, etc. And it is natural to long for the past. Perhaps some of us are tempted to retreat and simply pretend that we still live in the “good old days”.

Well, I hope that at least some of us are thinking .... We do not need to be the church of yesterday. We need to be church of today. Here. We are tempted by a new vision of what “church” can look like in 2024. Particularly here in a community that is predominately Muslim. In a community where most of the Christians are Catholic. This

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is a great place to reimagine what church can be both in terms of what goes on here on a Sunday morning, but also in terms of what we do mid-week, and who we engage with in our wider community. I am so delighted to be here with you as we experiment together in creating the church of 2024 here at Chapel in the Park.

This is particularly relevant today - because we will shortly have our Annual Congregational Meeting.

I've participated in a lot of congregational meetings. And every single congregational meeting I've participated at all provide answers to one simple question. Usually the question is not asked directly. And usually these exact words are not used. But every aspect of a congregation meeting answers the question, "who are we?" Because the decisions that we make, the motions that we support, or the motions that we reject, reflect who we are and who we want to become.

Because the ultimate question that is addressed by all congregational meetings is - who are we? And who do we want to become? Where are we going?

Lent is a journey. Which means it is good to ask .... Where are we going? Today, I hope we can reflect on where we are going in two ways. On a personal level as we consider the spiritual journey that each of us are on. And on a congregation level.

Our journey continues.

*Amen.*