

You Are the Christ

Mark 8:27-30

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In her book with the title *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells of a man her husband met at a bar. Her husband brought the man to their house and he spent the night. The next morning the man was having a cup of coffee as he told his story. He had got involved running drugs and making some fast money. One day his partner drove past someone and debated whether to turn the car around. His partner said, “I need to kill him,” as he reached for a gun that was hidden under the seat. “I need to kill him, but he’s with someone, and I don’t know who. So it’ll have to wait.” With that he cursed and drove on.

This man at the kitchen table with Kathleen Norris then said, “It was right then I decided to get out. This was way over my head.” She then writes, “And that is salvation, or at least the beginning of it. The Hebrew word for ‘salvation’ means literally ‘to make wide,’ or ‘to make sufficient,’ and our friend had recognized that the road he had taken was not wide enough to sustain his life; it was sufficient only as a way leading to death.”¹

Why do people turn to Jesus? Maybe like Kathleen Norris describes, folks realize the path they are on is just not wide enough to sustain life. They realize the path they are on is leading to death.

Kathleen Norris wrote a book with the title *Amazing Grace*. A man named John Newton wrote a song with the title *Amazing Grace*. Many have heard the story of John Newton. He lived in the 1700s in England. In his early years he was the captain of a slave trading ship. When John Newton was twenty three his ship was caught in a terrible storm and the loss of life was imminent. He was reading a religious book at the time and between the message of the book and the frightening experience at sea he was moved to make a personal confession of Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Realizing John Newton’s background as a slave trader might make it easier to understand the first verse of the famous hymn. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...” Looking back on the cruelty and inhumane treatment he was guilty of toward slaves, wretch is not too strong a word. You get the sense that part of Newton’s conversion was realizing the path he was on was not wide enough. It was a dead end. John Newton had a conversion experience, not only leaving the slave trade but becoming a crusader against it.²

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A vocabulary of faith*, p. 19, 20.

² Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, p. 28, 29.

Sometimes people turn to Jesus because they are anxious to leave their past behind. Others turn to Jesus because in him they find a future. There is a story told in John 9 of a man who has been blind since birth. One day Jesus was walking along and he saw this man who had been blind from birth. Without a word to the man Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it in the man's eyes. Jesus then told the blind man to go and wash his eyes in the Pool of Siloam and after he went and washed he came home seeing. What follows in John 9 is a dramatic encounter between the blind man, Jesus, and the religious leaders. The religious leaders keep asking the man how he came to be able to see. As the man stubbornly insists he can see because of Jesus, the religious leaders keep telling him there must be some other answer. Finally, with nothing else to say, the man says, "There is one thing I know. I was blind but now I see." The story ends with the blind man confessing his faith in Jesus and giving his worship to Jesus.

The words of the man who has received the gift of sight seem to have worked their way into the hymn John Newton wrote about Amazing Grace. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

How do people come to faith in Jesus Christ? How do people come to believe in Jesus Christ? How do people come to trust in Jesus Christ? Sometimes the path a person is on just isn't wide enough and they realize they need a new path, a new person to follow, to trust. Sometimes a person's past is marked with failure and sin and they realize they have been a wretch...but God's amazing grace saves them. Sometimes a person meets Jesus and the future opens up for them. "I once was blind, but now I see."

The Gospel lesson this morning that is found in Mark 8 presents another way people come to faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes they are asked a question.

Jesus and his disciples went to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way, Jesus asked them, "Who do people say I am?" The disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Mark 8:27-29

Apparently there comes a time in the relationship of those who are following Jesus when they are asked a question of supreme importance. This passage comes almost exactly halfway through the Gospel of Mark. Beginning with Peter and Andrew and soon their fellow fishermen James and John and not long after that Levi the tax collector and eventually a group of twelve that formed his group of disciples, these folks have been following Jesus. They opened their homes to Jesus. They ate with him. They traveled with him. They left things for him, nets, boats, tax collector booths. Now almost exactly halfway through the Gospel, the hour has come when Jesus asks not just

who do others say I am...that is not the only question he asked them that day in Caesarea Philippi, but there comes a time when Jesus asks his disciples, his followers...But what about you. Who do you say I am?

Billy Graham recently died, and many people have been reflecting about the impact his life and his ministry had upon so many people. Billy Graham used to have a weekly radio broadcast called The Hour of Decision. It was first broadcast in 1950. The broadcast featured sermons of Billy Graham and messages he preached at his crusades. The title of the broadcast speaks to the purpose of the broadcast. The broadcast called for a decision. Who do you say Jesus is?

Peter was faced with a decision when Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter was an Israelite, a Jew. He had grown up with the stories of God being the Almighty Father who created the heavens and the earth. This God chose Israel and built a nation. God's plan and purpose was for Israel to be a blessing to all the nations. Israel received God's covenant, God's promises, God's blessings, the deliverance of the Exodus when God parted the Red Seas and his beloved children left behind the slavery and oppression in Egypt and walked on dry land through the Red Sea and on to the Promised Land of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. A kingdom was established with David as the model king. When that kingdom fell on hard times, when the temple was destroyed and Israel was sent into exile, God promised hope and a future. There would be a new king...not just any king...not just another David...but a Messiah...a chosen one, who would establish God's kingdom on earth as it was in heaven.

Now somewhere in the villages around Caesarea Philippi, a town 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, Peter is faced with his own personal Hour of Decision. Who was Jesus to Peter? Could it be that all of God's promises, all of God's plans, all of God's purposes, were focused on this one man? If Peter took the leap of faith would he fall flat on his face, trusting in just another in a long line of promised saviors? Would he be disappointed? Would Jesus be just another flash in the pan? Or...and this is the heart of the gospel message...or...could it be that Jesus truly was God's anointed one, God's chosen one, God's promised one?

I hope we don't make the mistake of thinking we are innocent bystanders. Yes, we are sitting comfortably on the fringes of this story, reading, watching, listening as Jesus puts the question to his disciples. But Mark does not intend for us to be comfortable. The purpose of the Gospel is not for us to casually watch this drama unfold, gazing safely from the sidelines as Peter wrestles with this daunting question that Jesus has put to him. Mark wants us in the ring with Peter. Mark wants us asking ourselves, "Who do we say Jesus is?" I believe Mark wants us to come face to face with Jesus and hear him ask you, and me that ultimate question of the greatest importance. "But who do you say I am?" This isn't just Peter's Hour of Decision. This Hour of Decision is for you. This Hour of Decision is for me.

I hope you can sense the incredible statement of faith that comes from the lips of Peter as he makes his decision. Peter, in his Hour of Decision, answers Jesus by saying, “You are the Messiah.” Peter goes all in. He puts his complete faith and trust in Jesus.

Peter did not know everything about Jesus. None of us ever do. Every question is not answered. Every mystery is not explained. At some point you believe in what you know about Jesus, and you take the leap. Peter still had lots to learn. Just read the next set of verses, and I really mean it, please read the next set of verses. There is so much more he needs to know about Jesus, about how suffering and death will be the path Jesus will walk...and how it will be a path his disciples will walk...a path his followers like you and me will be called to walk. Peter doesn't do too well when Jesus tells about suffering and death. Not right then. But he eventually gets it. He gets it so well that later, when he wrote a letter to others who were considering following Jesus, who faced their own Hour of Decision, Peter said this. “In his great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade...” (I Peter 1:3,4) Peter took the leap of faith, and looking back later in his life, he had no regrets. In Jesus Peter found new birth, a living hope, and the promise and power that came through Jesus being resurrected from the dead.

The leap of faith is an interesting concept. I mentioned earlier that John 9 has a story of a man who is blind from birth and upon meeting Jesus he is healed. His testimony became, “I was blind but now I see.” It is one of the more interesting details in the Gospel of Mark that right before Peter has his Hour of Decision, Mark tells of an encounter Jesus has with a blind man. It is a completely separate story from the one found in John 9. It is a curious story. Listen to what Mark tells us.

“Some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, ‘Do you see anything?’ The man looked up and said, ‘I see people; they look like trees walking around.’ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.” (Mark 8:22-26, selected verses)

Maybe that story is just about a blind man regaining his sight. And maybe it is about people who are blind until they meet Jesus. When they meet Jesus they begin to see. And whether it all happens at once or they slowly gain sight, one day their eyes are opened and they see everything clearly. One day Jesus is just another story of just another interesting path of life that some choose and some ignore and life goes on and the real world is made up of business and pleasure and chasing after hopes and dreams. One day Jesus is someone who lived a long time ago and he doesn't have a whole lot to do with the real meaning and purpose of life which is...hmmmm...that is interesting,

isn't it. What is the real purpose of life? Maybe one day you start to see a little more...and a little more...and a little more...and then maybe one day you see clearly, and Jesus isn't just another person of interest. You see Jesus for who he is. You see Jesus for who he has always been. Jesus is God's beloved Son who came to bring healing and hope to this world. And before you or I or Peter or any other human being ever went all in with Jesus, Jesus went all in with us...Jesus went all in for us. Jesus gave his life on the cross so that we could have life. And as our eyes are opened and we see clearly, we realize it is the Hour of Decision. In that moment, in that Hour of Decision, Jesus is asking us, "Who do you say I am?"

Louie Zamperini was a man who could not see things very clearly. He had gone through great suffering and discouragement. He had endured bondage so severe that he could not see any signs of hope. He could not see a vision for his future. In a real sense Louie was blind. Louie was a World War II hero, but when his plane was shot down in the Pacific he was captured and held as a POW. He was treated with great cruelty. He was beaten and tortured and nearly starved to death. Somehow he survived. Somehow he was released. Somehow he made it home. Somehow he fell in love. Somehow he got married. But *Unbroken*, the book about Louie's life, has this to say about the hero who returned from the war. "Louie was wrecked." He drank until he would pass out at night. "Rage, wild, random, and impossible to quell, began to consume him...His mind began to derail." The sound of a car backfiring would send him to the floor in the bar, cringing in fear as people stared at him. At his lowest point it was said that no one could reach Louie, because he had never really come home. In prison camp he had been dehumanized and his dignity taken away.

As Louie drank and drank, he became so cruel his wife decided to divorce him. Before they made their final split, a neighbor told them about a crusade being held in Los Angeles. Louie would not listen. His discouragement and the affects of his cruel bondage as a prisoner of war kept him from listening. But his wife Cynthia listened and she went to the crusade. She came home and told Louie she was not going to divorce him. She had experienced a religious awakening. To Louie, this was just about the last thing he needed. His wife said she was not going to divorce him, but he had to come to the crusade. Night after night Louie refused.

The preacher kept preaching. This was back in the fall of 1949. Preaching at those crusades was a 31 year old evangelist named Billy Graham. the same Billy Graham whose radio show was called The Hour of Decision. Finally Louie agreed to go listen for one night. At the end of his message Billy asked for every head to bow and every eye to close. Here it was...the Hour of Decision. Well, here is what Louie decided. Louie decided to get up and walk out. But something was happening. Grudgingly he agreed to go the next night. Billy preached. At the end of the sermon he said, "Every head bowed and every eye closed." Again, it was the Hour of Decision. Louie, fighting God every step of the way, remembered at that moment being on a raft in the Pacific.

He had been shot down. At that point his death seemed certain. In his desperation he had prayed to God on that raft. “If you will save me, I will serve you forever.” Now, years later, at a crusade, with every head bowed and every eye closed, God cut through the hardness of a man’s broken heart and the deep pain of concentration camps and gave one lost soldier a vision. God opened Louie’s eyes. God helped Louie remember the promise he had made. God had saved his life on that raft in the Pacific. While every head was bowed and every eye closed, Louie Zamperini got up that night and made his way to the altar. He woke up the next morning and he felt cleansed. “He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man he had been. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation. Softly, he wept.”³

When we make the leap of faith, we go all in with Jesus. But the only way we can make the leap of faith is to know that Jesus has already gone all in for us. And he always goes all in for us. His promise is that he will never leave us and he will never forsake us. There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God. I can’t explain it but I have experienced it.

In 2011 we were taking a group of people from our church in Houston on a trip to Israel, to the Holy Land. Becky and Pete were two of our dearest friends and they helped us organize, plan, and promote the trip. We had 45 people signed up. Four days before the trip Becky called me at 6:30 in the morning and through sobs and tears she told me that sometime that night or early in the morning Pete had suddenly died. It was devastating and it was heartbreaking. I just assumed Becky would cancel out of the trip. But Becky’s daughters urged her to go, and her daughters came along with her, taking Pete’s place. They all felt like it might be the best thing to be with a group of people who loved Becky, who knew Pete, and who would hold them close as they grieved. So Becky came. How does anyone find the strength to go forward when they lose a loved one? Isn’t that when we need Jesus more than ever? I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. Jesus holds us close and says, “I am all in with you.”

On our second or third day we were staying at a hotel right by the Sea of Galilee. That is the Sea where Jesus was walking on the shore one day when he called two brothers to follow him. One of those brothers was Peter. Our tour guide woke us up early and took us to the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and then we boarded a boat. We met the captain. He had on a nametag. The captain of the ship we boarded to cruise on the Sea of Galilee was Peter. Becky stood next to Peter and we took a picture. Becky had lost her Pete, but on this special day the name tag of the captain was a small sign reminding us of our dear friend Pete. We went out on the Sea of Galilee. It was a perfect day. The waters were calm. The sun was shining.

^{3 3} Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, 351-376.

As we got to the middle of the Sea of Galilee, the captain of the ship cut the engines. We sat there in the calm and the quiet, and it was just as if Jesus was in the boat with us. You could have stopped the world and I would have been fine sitting there feeling as close as I have ever felt to Jesus. But the world kept spinning. As the precious moments passed our captain played a song over the ship's speakers. It was the hymn, "How Great Thou Art." That hymn praises God for creation and nature and wonder and awe. And then that hymn praises God for Jesus. That hymn tells us how Jesus went all in for us.

"And when I think that God his Son not sparing sent him to die I scarce can take it in, that on the cross my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin." Our whole group, all 45 of us, we knew the chorus. We sang like we never sang before. "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art..." While we were singing, I looked at Becky, who so recently had buried her husband. This wasn't her Hour of Decision. She made her decision for Jesus years and years before. But maybe it was her Hour of knowing her decision was right. She wasn't alone in her sorrow. She wasn't alone in her sadness. She wasn't alone at all. Jesus was all in with her. And with tears in her eyes she was singing with all of her heart, and all of her soul, and all of her strength, "How Great Thou Art, How Great Thou Art."

Maybe today is your Hour of Decision. Maybe today it is like Jesus has just spit on your eyes and put his hands on your eyes and you are seeing things...and he is touching your eyes again...and maybe today you see things clearly. You see Jesus for who he is. Maybe today is your Hour of Decision. Maybe today you hear Jesus asking you, "Who do you say I am?" And maybe today you are looking back at your Hour of Decision...mine was in the summer before I went into seventh grade...maybe today you are looking back at your Hour of Decision, and as you look back, and as you are reminded once again that Jesus went all in for you, for me, for this whole world, maybe today you are simply thanking God that you are absolutely certain your Hour of Decision is the best decision you have ever made.

One thing is certain. Mark did not intend for us to be innocent bystanders watching Peter wrestle with his Hour of Decision. Jesus is all in for us. And the Jesus who is all in for us, for me, and for you, is asking the ultimate question, the most important question. He is asking, "Who do you say I am?"