

Text: Mark 8: 27-38  
Title: Locating God  
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If you wanted to talk about the nature of God where would you go?  
If you wanted to ask about the identity of God where would you go?  
If you wanted to inquire about following the way of God where would you go?  
Where would you locate the question?  
Where would you go to talk about something so essential and so pivotal?  
Where would you locate questions about God?

Would you go to a great mountain top under star spangled skies?  
Would you go the steps of the capital ~ to the cathedrals of power?  
Would you go to the center of the city ~ to the crowded cross-streets of culture and commerce?  
Would you go to the ashes of history's horrors or to the halls of learning?  
Where would you locate questions about God?  
Where would you go?

Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi.  
And oddly enough, during my recent trip to Israel I went to Caesarea Philippi....

Caesarea Philippi is about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and the little enclave of Jewish villages where Jesus taught and healed and gathered disciples. Almost at the border of Lebanon in hard-scramble-rocky-desert-hills there are springs that tumble down into the marshes that feed the River Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. One of those springs gushed out of the limestone bedrock of a cave on the slopes of Mount Herman and Caesarea Philippi was built around that spring.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of years before Christ that spring was recognized as place of worship to Pan ~ the goat footed god of shepherds and nymphs, rustic mountain places and music. Today water just seeps out of the rock, but you can still see that there was a shrine dedicated to Pan and temple to Zeus and Pan.

A little more history?.....When the Roman Empire controlled that corner of the world Caesar Augustus gave it to Herod the Great in 20 B.C. and Herod built a white marble temple to Augustus at the entrance of the cave. And, as each successive culture conquered and controlled the area they built their own places of worship. In the middle of a barren and brutal desert they built temples to gods where it was fertile.

Just below Caesarea Philippi there is a spring that is still active and you get the sense of what Caesarea Philippi must have been like....

There are immeasurable gallons gushing forth ~ a waterfall from the very heart of God ~ cold and clear like living water, tripping, tumbling, flowing over rocks and pooling for fish, under lush green shade and fresh cool air. It smelled of

eucalyptus and Eden. Where life seemed desolate and fragile this place seemed alive and vital and....

you didn't want to leave,  
you wanted to put your feet in the water and rest,  
you felt a little hope,  
you wanted to believe in a god.

Now, it might just be coincidence, but isn't it possible that Jesus chose Caesarea Philippi to ask his disciples who they thought he was because this was precisely where questions of God converged? Pagan gods, Roman occupation, emperor worship, and Jewish hopes all collided in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus locates the question in the garden of the gods.

Where would you locate the question of God?

Jesus asks his disciples near Caesarea Philippi and Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah. All of the Gospel of Mark has led up to this crucial moment. Jesus has calmed storms, walked on water, cast out demons, raised the dead, healed lepers and paralytics, fed thousands and stretched the kingdom to the Gentiles.... And now in a confessional crescendo Peter proclaims that Jesus is the "Anointed One of God."

Jesus has come to deliver them from Romans rule.

Jesus has come to overthrow false gods.

Jesus has come to liberate his people from oppression.

Jesus has come to establish the reign of God.

Jesus has come to the garden of the Gods.

But, rather than celebrate Jesus throws a hard curve. First he tells them to keep that news to themselves and then he begins to talk about suffering and rejection. He turns everything on its head. He talks about dying.

Peter protests. This sounds like blasphemy. This isn't what they signed on for. This isn't right. This is foolishness. Ludicrous! If anything the Messiah would inflict suffering not suffer suffering. This wasn't supposed to be about death; this was supposed to be about life and victory and restoring God's rule through Israel. So, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him.

*If ever there was one who led with his heart its Peter. First to confess, first to rebuke, first to reject, first to get out of the boat, first to want to build booths on the mountain top, first to preach...*

In response Jesus uses the harshest of reprimands, and then he throws down the gauntlet:

To be the Messiah means the cross.

To be a disciple of the Messiah means the cross.

Dear friends this text is the pivot point in the Gospel of Mark. Everything before led up to this confession and everything after leads to the cross. In the garden of the gods Jesus picks up a tool of the state for torture and death and proclaims, "This is the way of God."

If you wanted to talk about the nature of God where would you go?  
If you wanted to ask about the identity of God where would you go?  
If you wanted to inquire about following the way of God where would you go?  
Where would you locate the question?  
Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi and relocated the question to the cross.

You know, in Jerusalem there is a cacophony of religious symbols. Every where you look wedged on top and over lapping and contradicting and competing are some of the humanities holiest religious symbols ~ all mixed in with the clatter of an open air market in Tijuana. But, I was drawn to one particular symbol: The Jerusalem Cross.

There are a variety of different crosses around the world ~ Greek cross, Celtic cross, etc, ~ but the Jerusalem Cross was explained to me this way:

This cross has a large central Greek cross and is surrounded by four smaller Greek crosses. The symbol was first used during the first crusade to represent the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The four crosses in the corners represent the four corners of the world or the four gospels. The cross in the center represents Jerusalem as the center of the world and the cross as the center of Jerusalem. The cross is at the center of the world....

The cross is at the center of the world. Now, I don't pretend for moment that in one sermon on a September Sunday morning we can plumb the depths of atonement as it relates to the cross or delve into the details of discipleship in post modern America as it relates to the cross, but I would offer that ours is a cruciform gospel. The staggering mystery of God on the cross is central and the call to follow is essential. Anything less asks a different question; anything less locates a different God.

What if we come at this way?

When Peter protests Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan" And, then when he calls the crowd and the disciples together he says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Now, basically in Greek "get behind me" and "follow me" are the same words. It may be redundant that to follow someone you would be behind them, but Jesus uses the same verb in consecutive sentences.

So, in a sense we are behind Jesus. He is out front. We're not running on ahead or making our own way. We simply follow. He makes the way.

We are hid behind Christ.

We are hid behind the cross.

We are located behind Christ.

R.T. France puts it this way:

*What Jesus calls for here is thus a radical abandonment of one's own identity and self determination, and a call to join the march to the place of execution follows appropriately from this. Such, "self-denial" is on a different level altogether with*

*giving up chocolates for Lent. It is not the denial of something to the self, but the denial of the self itself.*

Could it be that this text is not about cross bearing as sacrifice to satisfy God? Could it be that this text is about the death of self? Could it be the deep recognition that we have nothing to offer? Not even our notions of self, whatever they are:

self loathing,  
self important,  
selfish,  
self promoting,  
self serving,  
self giving,  
self absorbed  
self determining,  
self locating.

Where would you go to ask about God?  
Where would you locate the question of God?  
Jesus locates the question in the cross.

And, even as we are behind him,  
even as we are hid in him,  
even as we trust in him,  
even as we follow after him,  
even as we die with him, we are raised to new life.

Family of God in Christ Jesus where would you go to locate God?  
Come to the table of the cross.  
Amen.