

“Pooh-Bear Jesus”

People of Faith = People of Action Part 2

OT 24B-18

James 3: 1-2

Mark 8: 27-38

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What’s Jesus last name? Have you ever wondered that? Or maybe you think you know it. For the longest time, I thought I did, as I just assumed Jesus last name is... Christ! I mean, it’s what we call him. It’s who we say we believe in, right? Jesus Christ.

But I remember being stunned... stunned when I first learned that “Christ” isn’t Jesus’ last name. That “Christ” isn’t really a name at all. It’s a title. In the Greek it’s “Christos,” which is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew title, “Messiah,” which literally means, “the Anointed One.”

So instead of saying, “Jesus Christ,” a fuller pronouncement of his name would be Jesus the Christ... or Jesus the Messiah.

So when we say that we believe in Jesus Christ... we’re not saying that we believe there once lived a man named Jesus Christ who came from God. What we’re saying is... we believe that Jesus *is* the Christ. He is the Messiah, the one whom God sent to make everything right with the world.

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And clearly... clearly that *is* who Jesus is. In fact, one of the cool details of Mark’s gospel is how, in the very first verse of the very first chapter, Mark lets gospel readers in on this pivotal detail. He tells us right up front—first thing, in fact—that this guy named Jesus is the Son of God; the Messiah. So we—as readers—get to know from the beginning what the characters in the Gospel have to find out for themselves.

And in our lesson from Mark this morning, it seems it’s time for them to find out. So Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do folks say that I am?”

“Well, let’s see.” they said, “From everything we’ve heard, some say you’re John the Baptist. Some think you’re Elijah; and others say you’re one of the prophets.”

Clearly, folks had been putting quite a bit of thought into it, but their speculation wasn’t quite right.

So Jesus turned his question on his most intimate companions. “And who do *you* say that I am? You who know me better than anyone else around me... who do *you* think I am?”

It’s a gutsy question to ask, right? Who am I?

But it’s an even gutsier question to answer for those who desperately didn’t want to get it wrong.

So let's be clear. We're uncovering a pivotal moment in Mark's Gospel here this morning. In fact, many scholars suggest this is *the* pivotal moment around which Mark builds his entire gospel.

*Who is Jesus?*

"Who do you say that I am," he asked his disciples.

And in a moment of profound faith and powerful confession, Peter rose to his feet, and, speaking for the 12, said, "You, Jesus, are the Christos. You are the Messiah. You are the one we've been waiting for. You are the Anointed One who will restore Israel as a light to the nations! You are our Glorious King!"

Peter's confession was as beautiful as it is profound. And it seems to have answered some concerns for Jesus. Once he knew the disciples understood who he was, Jesus decided they were at long last ready to be let in on the rest of the story. So he began to teach them what would soon happen—how he'd soon suffer, and be rejected, even killed. Mark says Jesus shared it all "quite openly," unafraid to let the disciples in on what was in store.

But the 12 didn't take kindly to what they heard. Not one bit. For while they believed Jesus was the Messiah, this was *not* kind of Messiah they were expecting. Suffering was not something they thought a Messiah could do. And death... certainly, out of the question.

For their Hebrew traditions had made it clear... how God would one day send a mighty Messiah to save Israel. How God would send them a conquering hero who would vanquish Israel's enemies and lead the Hebrew people into a new era of abundance and greatness. While they didn't know the specifics... if he'd come as a king or prophet or military man... their Hebrew traditions had taught the disciples that the coming Messiah would be glorious... powerful... Not some suffering reject who'd die at the hands of their oppressors.

Peter simply wasn't going to hear of it. So he sprang to his feet and began scolding Jesus. "You're the Messiah," he yelled. "You're the one we've been waiting for. How can you talk about suffering and death like that? You can't suffer. You're the one who's going to put an end to our suffering. You can't be killed by the Romans. You're going to lead us in our revolt against Romans!"

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They were expecting a Messiah built upon the premise of power over weakness, wealth over poverty, the greatest over the least. They wanted a Messiah who would do what they wanted... the way they wanted it done. But that's not the kind of Messiah they—or we—have gotten.

Frankly, I don't blame Peter or the disciples for not wanting to here Jesus talk of suffering. If I had my druthers, I'd want the kind of Messiah they did, too.

- I, too, want a Messiah who's going to kick butt instead of having his kicked.
- I, too, want a Messiah who'll bless those I like and curse those I don't.
- I, too, want a Messiah who's going to magically make everything right... wipe every tear... heal all who are sick... mend all that's broken... right all that's wrong.

But as Jesus told Peter, “When you hope for these things, you’re setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

While God is many things—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—God never has been and never will be a dictator. Instead, God has blessed us all with the ability to make incredibly important *choices*... choices regarding who we will be... how we will live and love... what we will value... and, perhaps most importantly, who we will follow. God lets us make all these choices that not only shape our lives, but the world we share.

Jesus made this all very clear in his very next breath, calling the crowds over to him, saying, “Listen up, everybody. You need to understand this. Each of you... each of you, can choose to follow me, and seek the kingdom I reveal. But if you do, you must be prepared to deny yourself and take up your cross in order to follow me.”

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And with that... he left it up to them... and to us. He’s given us the choice.

We can choose to follow Jesus. We can choose to follow in his footsteps, knowing full well it will require things like sacrifice... like loving the one we don’t necessarily like... like tending to those we don’t even know... like giving our hard-earned money to those who didn’t earn it, but desperately need it.

Or... OR we can choose to another path. We can choose to chase after someone or something that promises everything but requires nothing. Someone who won’t challenge us to go where the hurting is... to speak truth to power... to choose love even when it’s risky, maybe even foolish to do so.

We can follow the one who calls us to leave self behind so that we can embrace the kingdom of God fully and completely... OR we can follow one who’ll let us keep clinging to all the things that haven’t been able to fulfill us yet?

And sitting here... being here together in worship... I know the choice seems easy and simple. But the hard truth is that choosing to follow the kind of Messiah God has given us is anything but easy or simple. When confronted with risk... when asked to actually do something about the pains, the needs, the prejudice, the violence around us... when asked to actually risk our own comfort... our own well-being... when asked to risk our own perspectives... it’s much easier to rationalize turning *from* the Messiah God has given us, and turning *to* a safer, softer, simpler messiah who won’t ruffle feathers or ask too much of us.

The Presbyterian pastor Landon Whitsett calls this kind of messiah Pooh Bear Jesus. He says,

*We all crave a relationship with this Pooh Bear Jesus. Pooh Bear Jesus is lovely and cuddly. Pooh Bear Jesus makes us feel good when things are bad. Pooh Bear Jesus never judges us, never makes us uncomfortable, never asks us to do anything other than what we are currently doing. We are in control of Pooh Bear Jesus, and so, Pooh Bear Jesus just smiles at us and he sits on the pillows on our bed. We dictate who Pooh Bear Jesus is and what Pooh Bear Jesus does.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Landon Whitsett, [www.landonwhitsett.com/2012/02/02/pooh-bear-jesus/#more-776](http://www.landonwhitsett.com/2012/02/02/pooh-bear-jesus/#more-776)

And, you know, Landon's write. We all crave Pooh Bear Jesus... in part because following the real McCoy can be so costly. Jesus makes clear, discipleship requires sacrifice. He says it plain as day, "If you want to live into the Kingdom of God here and now, you're gonna have to give, because the only way to experience love and grace fully is to give it away completely."

Did we hear that? "The only way to experience love and grace fully is to give it away completely!"

**It's why people of faith simply must be people of action.** People who understand that life isn't something to be hoarded, but given away. People who understand there cannot be peace or joy for me until there is peace and joy for you, as well. People who understand our lives aren't ours to protect or cling to... Our lives are gifts from God we get to spend... Gifts we get to spend on those we get to love... whether we know them or not.

(Jesus knows) it is in the spending of our lives that the God's kingdom grows. Not by sitting back or simply taking care of our own. But by giving ourselves away. Just as our Messiah has shown us.

Granted... he may not be the Messiah we would've chosen for ourselves... but thank God, he's the very Messiah we need. Amen.