

The Story: Jesus, Son of God
Matthew 16:13

Last week I was at Whitworth for a very unusual board meeting. I lost my voice! I could not speak! One of my friends... former friends...said, "Our prayers have been answered!"

We made it back in time for Saturday worship. Ellis posed a challenge to us: take the courageous step of offering to pray for our friends when they share a need. He challenged us to ask, "Can I pray for you about that right now?" So I'm wondering, did any of you take Ellis up on his challenge?

We've been journeying through *The Story*, an abridged version of the Bible. Two weeks ago, after waiting for thousands of years, at last God's promised Messiah appeared. In those early moments of Jesus' ministry, the people had a common response: Amazement! Jesus was an amazing miracle-worker, amazing exorcist, amazing healer of lame men and lepers and mothers-in-law. Jesus wasn't looking to get famous, but he did. Everyone was buzzing about his amazing miracles.

Then last week focused on his amazing teaching. We listened to the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. We listened as he taught us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. We listened with amazement to some of the most sublime stories ever told—the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son. If you had never before heard the teachings of Jesus, you would have joined others in saying, "This man is the most amazing teacher we have ever heard." So amazing miracle-worker, amazing teacher—in those early days, it was easy to follow Jesus. He was the "it" guy; surrounded by paparazzi and adoring fans.

But things are about to change. In fact, you get a hint of the changing mood in the last few sentences of last week's chapter. Jesus taught some hard things, and suddenly, Jesus wasn't so popular. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." The shine was off the apple. Mr. Amazing had taken a hit in the polls. So what is Jesus going to do to recapture market share? Nothing! In fact, the way he acts, you'd think he wanted to drive people away. Matthew 16:13.

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter replied,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it...”

Amazing exorcist, healer, prophet, teacher—everything about Jesus in those early days was amazing, and everyone was speculating about him. The Samaritan woman wondered, “Could this be the messiah?” The synagogue people asked, “What is this—a new teaching?” His own terrified disciples asked, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” The crowds in Capernaum summed it up: “We have never seen anything like this!” Everyone suspected that Jesus might really be the Messiah.

But in Matthew 16, for the first time, Jesus poses the question. Walking together in beautiful Caesarea Philippi—suddenly, Jesus stops, whirls on his disciples and asks the money question: “Who do you say that I am?” That is the most important question of your existence. Every human being will one day give answer to question, whether on earth or before the Throne of Judgment. Who do you say that Jesus is?

It was Peter’s shining moment. It is easy to make fun of Peter because he was like St. Bernard puppy—so eager to please, so clumsy... he was constantly getting himself in trouble. But in this moment, he looks good. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. And Peter pipes up. “Why you are the Christ, the Messiah... the Son of the Living God.”

Can you see the smile on Jesus’ face? “Blessed are you, Simon; you didn’t come up with this on your own. God revealed it to you! And now, I’m going to give you a new nickname: Peter, Rock. I’m going to call you Rocky, and on this foundation of faith I am going to build my entire church.” All those amazing things they had witnessed—all the miracles and exorcisms and teaching, all taken together convinced Peter that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. He got it right! Huzzah! Let’s party, right? And then Jesus delivers the supreme buzz kill. Verse 21

²¹From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

I’ll bet you didn’t see that one coming. Neither did the disciples! Jesus has finally confirmed what everyone suspected; he is the Messiah. Then in the next moment, he says, “Oh, and by the way, we will go to Jerusalem so that I can be arrested, tortured, killed and raised to life on the third day.”

Say what? They must have choked on their picnic sandwiches. This made no sense! Messiahs conquer. They are victorious. They rally the nation. Messiahs don’t get

arrested and tortured and killed. What is Jesus smoking? This is crazy talk. So Peter, still riding high, decides to bail Jesus out. "And Peter took him aside..." Let's stop there. Peter hears Jesus saying embarrassing stuff that is definitely not helpful to their plan of world conquest, so he decides to save Jesus from himself. He sidles up next to him, puts his arm around his shoulder and gently, but firmly, pulls the Lord of the Universe off to one side where he can "rebuke him" in private. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; what shall I do with you? You can't talk this way!" How'd that work for him? Listen:

²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." ²³But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Wow, that was a fast fall from glory, wasn't it? Peter goes from being "Rocky" to "Satan" in five verses! What in the world happened? Jesus is redefining what it means to be Messiah. He looks ahead to the suffering and death that will be as much a part of his work as his amazing miracles and teachings. In next week's chapter, all but two pages contain references to Jesus' impending death, and the more he talks about the cross, the more it divides his audience. More people turn away. More arguments ensue over whether Jesus is the real thing or a phony. Many who once found Jesus amazing now find him offensive.

And it only gets worse. ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. So not only is the Messiah going to suffer and die, every follower of Jesus must be prepared to do the same. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Somehow, in a way we do not understand and certainly don't relish, the disciple of Jesus will follow him on his road of suffering; it is part of what shapes us. True disciples of Jesus will suffer somewhere along our journey!

What is your response to that? How about this: Yuck! Who wants to suffer! That's not what we signed up for. We want the first two chapters! We want Amazing Jesus, the healer and provider and multiplier and exorcist and teacher. That part we like, but this is bait and switch! This part about walking with Jesus in his suffering and death... that part we don't like at all! And suddenly the fair weather disciples slip away.

These next two chapters are the Cut and Run chapters. The crowds who adored Amazing Jesus don't like Suffering and Dying Jesus one bit. When Jesus took the girl's dead hand and raised her up, they loved it. When Jesus took the leper's rotten hand and raised him up, they loved it. When Jesus took Peter's sinking hand and raised him up, they loved it! When Jesus told them to take up 12 baskets of miraculous table scraps... when Jesus told a lame man in Capernaum, "Take up your mat and go home"... when Jesus told a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda,

“Take up your bed and walk,” they loved it! But when Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me” they didn’t love that at all.

Neither do we. We all prefer the Amazing Jesus of chapters 1 and 2—the healer, blessing, multiplier, provider. And that is a part of what it means to follow Jesus the Amazing, but following Jesus will also be offensive and hard. The next two chapters! There are times when each of us will be called to walk the path of suffering and betrayal and death with Jesus. Not because he has failed us but because he uses those moments to complete our work of salvation... to shape us for eternity. And those are our “cut and run” moments when we decide if we only want to follow Amazing Jesus or if we will trust that the Offensive, Suffering, Hidden Jesus who is still—is also—our Messiah.

It is hard for us in our safe society to put this to the test. We whine about how our American culture picks on us as Christians, but we don’t have a clue. Listen to this interview with a Christian Iraqi university student from Mosul who was forced to flee extremist Muslim terrorists. [video]

“We lost everything, but we are so proud because we are still in this faith... Jesus deserves all that.” We will likely never have to decide at gunpoint whether or not to confess Jesus. But our moment will come in the face of suffering. We will lose a loved one. We will lose a job. We will lose a marriage. We will lose a law suit. We will lose our reputation. Jesus will seem hidden from us, and we will have to decide whether we will follow Hidden Jesus as enthusiastically, as faithfully, as we follow Amazing Jesus.

Last November on my birthday, I got a call from my doctor. He was concerned about my blood work. That was the beginning of a four-month period of tests and consults, trying to determine whether or not I had prostate cancer. Finally I had a biopsy. And then I waited some more. Those four months were among the hardest of my life. It was like living on a sine wave. At times, I felt high; full of faith and peace. At other times, I felt so low, terrified, and then ashamed because I didn’t trust God. I wanted to pray for healing, but I knew that faithful followers of Jesus get cancer; I did not presume that I would be spared from what my brothers and sisters face every day. Have any of you have ever lived under a cloud like that? Waiting for tests, waiting for results, trying to function and pray and believe and be faithful—you know what it’s like.

For most of my life, I have known Amazing Jesus. It is easy to follow Amazing Jesus. But for four months, I got a glimpse of Suffering Jesus—just a glimpse, but it was a chance for me to ask this important question: can I be faithful to Jesus? Can I trust him when he leads me down a path of suffering or even death? Can I believe that Jesus uses the murky moments to shape my soul as much as—even more than—he uses the moments of brightness and blessing? And when I am so terrified that I don’t even know how to pray or breathe, am I willing to hold on to Jesus anyhow?

I got the news back from my biopsy three weeks ago: benign, cancer-free. Obviously I am grateful and relieved—but this changed me. For one thing, I think it will make me a better pastor, but I also want to be a better Christian. I want to be faithful to Jesus when my news is not good—when my future is not certain, when answers do not come, when I am afraid. I want to be faithful to Jesus then, too, because he was faithful to me. Through His pain and suffering and fear and abandonment, he was faithful. And in the end, God used that very suffering and pain to save me and you!

Jesus isn't always amazing to us. Sometimes, he is hidden—or even offensive. The decision we must make is this: in those hard moments, will I cut and run? Or will I decide right now that Jesus is trustworthy and deserves my faithfulness?