

Between a Rock and a Hard-Head

Mark 8:22-33

*Jesus accepts you where you are, but can
change you into what you want to be.*

The first story.

- *Mark 8:22-26*

- Sets the stage.
 - *Isaiah 61:1-2, 35:5*

- Is a parallel.

The second story.

- *Mark 8:27-30*

- The place.

- The question.

Jesus asks me this question.

- The answer.

The third story.

- *Mark 8:31-33*

Today, with my life, my answer is...



Between a Rock and a Hard-Head¹

Mark 8:22-33

Ten years ago next October, many of you know I was in a car accident. I was coming down highway 410 from the mountains when a motorcycle driver coming around the corner toward me was speeding and suddenly ran into me. He walked away without a scratch, but my car ramped off his motorcycle, flew over 30 feet then landed upside down and began spinning like a top until it went over the embankment and began rolling. I landed right side up facing the other direction. I won't go into the gory, bloody details, but I have a scar that runs across the top of my head from front to back and I live with chronic headaches, all the time. It's never a question of if I have a headache, but how bad will it be. I remember every detail of the accident, but I don't remember the four months after the accident and still don't. Gradually my short-term memory came back, although it's still not what it was before that. The state patrolman had personally said he was shocked that I survived at all, let alone without any broken bones. The folks in the ER said the same thing. When people ask me how I think I survived such an accident, I tell them it's because of three things: "A big God, Toyota safety standards, and a very hard-head!" It's not the first time I've been called a hard head!

That's why I relate so well to another hard head from the Bible. It's a great story about Simon, the disciple whose name was changed by Jesus to Peter, which in Greek (Petra) means "Rock."

Last week on Easter we talked about the immovable stones that keep us in the grave – stones of trauma, troubles, and transgressions. But even with that stone rolled away in our life, some of us can still be hard-headed (I didn't say you have rocks in your head!), so I think you and I are going to be able to relate to Simon-Peter. Are you interested?

We'll find our story in Mark's Gospel account of the life of Jesus, and I want to read it for us. Would you help me honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it to us? You can read it on the screens if you'd like. This is from Mark chapter 8:

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He 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?"

He 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. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

¹ From a sermon by Michael O'Neill, originally preached 4/19/20

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They 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."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:22-33, niv)

May God bless the hearing of his Word to our hearts. You can be seated; thanks for standing.

In this story we can see that Jesus is stuck between a rock – what Simon Peter was – and a hard-head – what Simon Peter could become. And yet eventually God was able to accomplish great things through Peter; just as God can through you.

There may be a number of things that God wants to teach you today, but one thing for sure is this:

Jesus accepts you where you are, but can change you into what you can be.
(repeat)

Write that down if you need to: Jesus accepts me where I am but will change me into what I can be.

For that to happen in your life, it will depend on your response today. Prepare yourself to respond – to deal with what Jesus asks of you!

We'll start by looking at the context of this passage. It really involves three stories, which can be broken up into verses 22-26, then verses 27-30, and then verses 31-33. So let's dissect...

The first story.

First, this blind man is brought to Jesus for healing, and Jesus takes him outside the village. Doesn't that seem strange? Most of the time, Jesus just healed people right on the spot; so why does he take this man away from the crowds? Well for one, it shows Jesus' genuine tenderness and respect toward the man's feelings; Jesus doesn't want a crowd gathering around to watch the man. Then Jesus spits in the man's eyes. Why does he do that?

Because at that time it was a common ancient belief that spit had healing capabilities. Does that sound silly to you? What if I told you that belief is still around today? What do you do when you get a papercut on your finger? Aha! See, that notion is still around today. Jesus did this because he met the man at his level of understanding.

Then the man is healed, but it's in stages. It seems like it didn't "work" the first time. Why is that? Some speculate that Jesus was again being sensitive; if you think about it, to go from being totally blind and in the dark to suddenly seeing in the bright desert sun would blind the man again! But probably, this healing has a deeper significance; this healing tells us about something else.

First, this healing...

- Sets the stage.

Jesus is about to establish with his disciples the fact that he is the Messiah. Up until now, he's let them try to figure it out themselves. By performing this miracle, he's putting an exclamation point on the fact that he's the Messiah.

You see, it was well known among the Jews that the Messiah would restore sight to the blind. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah gave a lot of "messianic prophecies" – that is, sign posts and prophecies about the Christ. Listen to this one:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn... (Isaiah 61:1-2, niv)

In fact, Jesus used this very passage about himself by reading it in the synagogue in Luke 4:18-21, and then said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your midst." In another passage in Isaiah about the Christ it says:

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped."
(Isaiah 35:5, niv)

So a well-known pre-requisite of the Messiah is healing the blind, and healing the blind man sets the stage for Jesus' confirmation that he is the Christ, the long-promised Messiah.

The second reason that this first story is important is because it...

- Is a parallel

...with the *next* story.

When I was in tenth grade English class, we had a spritely older lady for a teacher – Miss Wilson – who spent her summers at Oxford studying. Every week she would pull out a vinyl record and we would listen to “Bergan Evans” reading ten vocabulary words, their spelling, and their definition. She called him her boyfriend “Bergie.” We would have to write the words down, memorize them, and then pass the quiz at the end of the week. I can still remember many of those words today. “Lugubrious. Lugubrious. (*spell*). Looking or sounding dismal. His face looked more lugubrious than usual. Lugubrious.” I still know a lot of those words, and one of those words was “Juxtaposition” – the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect.

Well, the first story is intended to be *juxtaposed*, or laid alongside, or paralleled with the second story in order to make a point. Here’s the point:

In the first story we see a man go from totally blind to partially seeing and then looking into the face of Jesus, seeing clearly.

In the second story we see the disciples who were spiritually blind and ignorant to who Jesus is, then beginning to understand...in fact, earlier in this chapter Jesus gave the disciples a spiritual eye exam and said:

“Do you have eyes but fail to see?” (Mark 8:18)

Then, in this story, we watch as the disciples finally see clearly who Jesus is.

So that brings us to...

The second story

...in the passage, verses 27-30. This short passage has been called the key that unlocks the entire Gospel. It is in the center and is the apex of Mark’s account. It is the “grand aha”! Or you can call it the Holy Spirit light bulb experience. The disciples finally figure it out.

Up until this point, Jesus’ ministry was to the multitudes, but from here on in, it is primarily to the disciples.

So let’s see what is going on. The shadow of the cross has fallen on Jesus’ path; crucifixion is only six months away from this event. So it is imperative for the disciples to really know who Jesus is. It is important that they get it straight because Jesus knows that their current concept of the Messiah is messed up. You see, they believed the Messiah would be a supernatural conqueror who would literally torture and destroy everyone *except* the Jews, until only the Jews were left to enjoy being in charge and watching all their enemies being broken and in hell. They thought that the Messiah would be the most destructive conqueror in history – violent, nationalistic, and vengeful. Those expectations were a mixture of the Jews’ anger and angst against being oppressed, and a limited understanding and misinterpretation of prophecy that spoke about Jesus’ *second* coming, but not his first. We don’t have time to go into that, but Jesus was *nothing* like their expectations, and time was short, so he had to start setting the disciples straight. (By the way, the reason Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone who he was, was in order to prevent the Jews from trying to set him up as a temporal king or getting himself killed before the proper time, which was to be during the Passover).

Now there are three things that I want us to see in this second story encounter, and the first thing is...

The place.

Jesus has this conversation with his disciples in a place called Caesarea Philippi. It is not coincidental nor accidental. Jesus *chose* this place to reveal for the first time who he was. Why here? What's so significant about it? This was the place where gods were born and made.

First, it was the birthplace of Baal worship – Baal is the infamous idol of the Old Testament stories. Because of this, the city was called Balinas for a while.

Second, Greek mythology says it's the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature. So it was also called Panias for a while. To this very day, it's called Banias – a combination of the two names.

Third, at the time that Jesus and the disciples were there, there was a magnificent marble temple that stood in the city as a worship center to the ruling "god", emperor Caesar Augustus. Roman leaders had established emperor worship – what better way to get peoples' obedience than to enforce the idea that the emperor is a god?

Fourth, even for the Jews this place was packed with sacred memories of God's miracles, since the water spring there is the origin of the Jordan River – the river where God had done so many miracles for the Jews during the Exodus stories.

So you can see why Jesus chose this place; Jesus deliberately confessed being the Christ in the very presence of the world's gods. And listen: you can bet that when Jesus comes into your life, he will establish himself as Lord over everything you worship!

But there is something else here too – He went right to the place that represented all their misunderstandings of who God is, and he met them there! Remember: Jesus will accept you where you are. Jesus will come right to where you are in all your confusion, pain, and misunderstanding and accepts you right there. But he won't leave you there; he will help you leave your false gods and spiritual misunderstandings behind and change you into who you can be. So that's what we learn from the place.

Secondly, let's look at...

The question.

Jesus begins with a great method of teaching – by asking questions. And it's a big one: "Who do people say that I am?" You might think it's a simple question needing a profound answer. If Jesus walked into a theological school today and asked the question, "Who do people say that I am?" My guess is that they'd say, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the kerygma in which we recognize the soteriological Logos of the Godhead having special pertinence toward interpersonal relationships with God and self and the other, resulting in the divine ecclesiological demonstration to the world." And Jesus

would say, “What?” (That’s all legit, by the way!) Actually, it’s a profound question needing a simple answer.

Why do you think Jesus asked that question; why did Jesus want to know what people thought? After all, Jesus knew who he was; it wasn’t like he was experiencing any kind of identity crisis or insecurity. It’s because Jesus was wanting *the disciples* to realize who he is. So, Jesus started the line of questioning by asking what popular opinion was, and the disciples answered by saying what they were hearing – a prophet, a great teacher, even a miracle worker. But then Jesus went straight to the heart of the issue by asking what *they* thought personally: “What about *you*? Who do *you* say that I am?” By the way, Jesus will always do this with you. He will get right to the heart of things with you.

When I first started out as a youth pastor I was in Southern California, just outside of Los Angeles. When I had a day off, I would sometimes go down to Hollywood Blvd to see the sights. The people there were usually very...interesting. And you could always count on some guy standing on the corner shouting at people to repent. But one time I saw a guy who was just quietly walking up the street with a sign hanging over his shoulders and on the front it said, “I’m a slave for Christ,” and on the back it said, “Who’s slave are you?” And I had to think, you know, Jesus asks that question of you, too, when he asks: “Who do you say that I am? I’m not as interested at what others might say or think about me, but what do you say?”

If you say, “You are the Christ,” it means he is Lord of your life. Write this down:

Jesus asks me this question.

He asks you today. Whatever you did or didn’t say about him in the past, what do you say today; who do you say today who Jesus is? Because third is...

The answer.

Simon is one of those guys who always spoke for everyone else. If Simon was on social media today, he’d be posting on behalf of everybody all the time. But Simon speaks up and makes the courageous and amazing statement: *You are the Christ!*

Matthew records this story in Matthew 16:13-20, and he says that Jesus pointed out to Simon that that’s not something humans could figure out; only God could have revealed that awareness to him. And with that, Jesus renames Simon to Peter. Peter is the name version of the word “Petra” which means rock. Jesus wasn’t proclaiming Peter to be a fake wrestler turned movie star, nor was he saying Peter was the first pope of the catholic church; Jesus was making this point: *this confession is the bedrock foundation of faith.* Simon the hard head is now Peter, built on the bed rock of faith!

So then comes...

The third story.

Once Jesus knows that they've finally figured out who he is, Jesus confirms it for them. No more guessing. So now that they know this about Jesus, he starts explaining to them God's gameplan – he tells them that he will be arrested, tortured, and crucified, but that this is necessary so that Jesus can be the ultimate sacrificial Passover lamb for the sins of the whole world, and then he'd rise from the dead. But this was beyond comprehension for newly named Peter who will have none of that – he will not allow Jesus to be arrested or tortured or for sure not crucified. This is crazy talk! So Peter takes it upon himself to set Jesus straight and interrupts Jesus and stops all that nonsense talk.

The ink hasn't even dried on Peter's name change when he starts spouting off in such a way that Jesus has to rebuke him, and in fact Jesus calls Peter "Satan" – the name for our enemy, the devil. The name means adversary or accuser. Right after Peter makes this foundational confession of faith that God has revealed to him, he starts talking like Satan, because, Jesus says, he doesn't have the things of God in mind but the things of humans. Peter is not thinking with God's thoughts but with limited, human thinking, which is counter to and always less than God's plans.

Wow! Jesus really was stuck between a rock and a hard-head. But don't miss this: Jesus accepted Peter where he was and wouldn't let go of who Peter could become. Because, for all Peter's faults, Peter accepted Jesus' correction and submitted to him.

For Peter to say, "You are the Christ", was more than intellectual ascent. It *was* with his mind – realizing that Christ was the source and meaning of life, but it was also with Peter's spirit – knowing and realizing God's love through Christ, and it was also with Peter's hands and feet; under Jesus' correction Peter was determined to obey Jesus and be changed by Jesus.

Peter answered, and even though he obviously had more growing to do, he was on the road to who he would become to make a difference in the world for Christ. And you will be too, depending on *your* answer. Christ is asking you today: who do you say that he is? He's asking you the question. Christ awaits your answer. He is looking to you lovingly awaiting your response. And you cannot leave here today until you've answered him. If you don't answer, then you've given him your answer. So what is your answer? Maybe you want to write this down:

Today, with my life, my answer is....

What will you say?

Jesus had proven his credentials with the healing of the blind man, which was also an analogy for the disciples' spiritual progress. So right there, in the epicenter of the world's spiritual confusion, Jesus questioned and confronted his disciples and declared himself to be Christ. Today, on your spiritual journey, in the midst of all the spiritual chaos and confusion going on in the world today, Jesus questions you: "Who do you say that I am?"

By the way, your answer does not determine who he is; he is Christ and Lord regardless of whether you say so or not. Peter's confession didn't change Jesus – it changed Peter. Your answer doesn't determine who Jesus is; your answer determines *who you are*. Jesus' identity is not at stake; yours is. You will either remain a hard-head, or you will become the

Rock. Name him Christ in honest faith and he will save you and begin the change in you toward the absolute best you could ever be.

Prayer

Benediction:

(May) Christ ... dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19, niv)