

Last week, we read a Psalm that mentioned Mt. Hermon, a large peak that rises above the border of modern-day Syria and Israel. At the time, I just thought it was a nice footnote. But footnotes have a funny way of reappearing. Maybe they are like those tiny, pesky mustard seeds that start growing, and intertwining, and tangling themselves with everything else in the garden.

The setting of today's text is Caesarea Philippi, also known as Caesarea Paneas, and not to be confused with Caesarea Maritima. You can guess from the name of the city that it was a place built to both honor and enforce the emperor's power and status. With Caesarea you get a shout out to Augustus, and with Philippi a nod to the famed Greek ruler, Philip. The Paneas part is important, too. All of these Caesareas pop up for different purposes – Maritima was a resort town on the Mediterranean coast that housed Herod's coastal getaway; In Philippi or Paneas, there was a temple to honor the Greek God Pan, and not just any temple, but an exquisite one made of white marble.

And it just so happens, that Caesarea Philippi, home of this great temple to Pan, sits at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

Last week's Psalm compared the unity, and the provisions, and the community we find in our kindred connection to God and neighbor with the fullness and generosity of Mt. Hermon's dew.

So as we think about this morning's text, I want to ask you to imagine the audacity of this temple's claim. Mt. Hermon is more than 9,000 feet high. That's like taking Mt. Mitchell and adding Pilot Mountain and Kings Mountain on top of it. Its icy peaks provide life-giving water for hundreds of miles. But step inside the city gates, and all those marble columns, and coins with the emperor's face, and armed guards, and a temple bureaucracy will seek to make you believe that it's the emperor who breeds new life, who offers provisions, who sets the sun in the sky, and stacks the mountains toward the heavens.

This city is a statement of power. It's a reminder that some have, and some have not, all at the emperor's discretion. And if you are a have-not, don't bother complaining, because the emperor can even take away the air in your lungs. It is what it is.

I realize that our passage is eight verses long, but I think it all comes down to two verses. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who am I?” And Peter replies, “You are the messiah, the son of the living God.”

This is Peter’s confession. Our language has changed a bit since his day; we might rephrase Peter’s statement to read: “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

The profundity and the provocativeness of this confession cannot be understated.

Peter is not persuaded by pomp and circumstance. Peter is not duped by power. Peter is not strong-armed by force. Peter is not dazzled by presentation. Peter is not blind to emptiness. Peter does not see lasting, transformative, spiritual Lordship in the emperor of Rome. For Peter, Caesar is NOT God.

Instead, Peter looks into the eyes of an itinerant preacher – a refugee, the child of a complicated relationship, a person without documentation, and with seasonal employment at best, and who has controversial ideas about authority – Peter looks into this man’s eyes and sees the will and the word of God. And right then, and right there, Peter proclaims his faith in God’s ability to transcend the reach of Caesar’s realm.

Now some of you might say, “Yeah, but Bob, Peter has a tendency to be stubborn, and in other gospel narratives, he shows a proclivity to be all bark and no bite. He’s not dependable and consistent.” Yes, sure, Peter’s not perfect. He denies Christ three times in the garden, and on a raging sea, with howling winds, even in the presence of Jesus, he fears for his life. And it takes Peter a lot of time to differentiate the practices of kingdom-living from Rome-living. And in Luke’s telling, on the very day Peter meets Jesus, and sees Jesus fill nets to the brim with fish, Peter thinks he is unworthy of discipleship, saying: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am sinful man!”

But to such criticism, I would answer, discipleship is a journey. Sure, formation and conviction can often take shape in one pivotal moment; but in other instances, discipleship – the living of faith – takes shape over time. It is forged with the same slow and steady precision of drops of water carving out a flowing stream.

This morning, much like that day on a little boat in a big storm, Peter is able to identify the power and resolve of Jesus. Sinking on tilted water, he cried out, “Save me, Lord!” And now, standing at the foot of Mt. Hermon, flanked by the grandeur of Caesar’s palace, hemmed in by the gravity of Caesar’s force, Peter is still able to rightly identify true Lordship.

In the coming chapters of each gospel, and eventually in the days after Jesus’ ascension, Peter will be able to do more than just identify God’s presence in Jesus. Peter will soon be able to trust in that presence, recognize its life-sustaining power, and use his faith to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. This rock of ours will not shiver when Joel’s prophesy is revealed in fire and wind on Pentecost. And this rock of ours will help crippled beggars walk and leap and praise God’s name in the temple. And this rock of ours will also be instrumental in helping to establish an assembly of faithful people in Rome – how’s that for subversive?!?

It seems to me, Sardis Baptist Church, that the challenge before us today is not simply to identify the presence of God in our midst. It is to trust in the transforming power of God’s presence over and against that of Caesar’s.

This morning, as we do every Sunday, we proclaim, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” That is, we identify and confess the Lordship of Christ.

We don’t do so in the shadow of Pan’s temple, but we aren’t entirely free of shadows. Towers of commerce seek to remind us of their influence and necessity in our lives. Virtual political conventions, no matter your affiliation, remind our citizens of their party’s ability to make our people whole. And gleaming glass hospitals reflect humanity’s quest for the fountain of youth.

And maybe we haven’t been fishing on a stormy, scary sea this week, and maybe we haven’t felt the earth shaking beneath us when Caesar’s centurions gallop by on horseback; but I don’t know a one of us, who in this age of corona, and murder hornets, and melting icecaps, and searing racial tensions, and food insecurity, and economic uncertainty, and unreliable Wi-Fi, who doesn’t feel like we’re walking on water without skis to help us float, or a hand to help guide us. We’re crying out: “Save us!”

But to whom are we directing our pleas? To corporations? Many of them do good things, but their initial priority is to generate profits for their shareholders, not to serve neighbors. To political parties? Well yes, I agree that some align with our values better than others, and I agree we should be active in voicing our vote, but even the best of these will still control nuclear codes, marginalize citizens, dole out capital punishment, justify violence and war, and prioritize the preservation of their own power. To hospitals? Well yes, yes, yes, I believe in and affirm the power and possibilities of science – our lives are infinitely better when we trust in and allow its advancement: our world is better without Polio and Smallpox. But the human body is a complicated organism, and sometimes, even the best science can't cure it. And even when cures and preventative services are available, we don't always have distribution systems that can make them readily accessible and affordable.

I think, too often, we're crying out, "Save us!" to entities that aren't equipped for such a purpose. Caesar's world wants to fix us, or better yet, Caesar's world wants us to believe the world is already fixed, and just needs a little tweaking. Corporations want black and brown lives to matter as long as it doesn't interfere with their ability to keep making trillions in the same old ways; as long as marginalized voices stay silent, and broken bodies stay unseen. Politicians want to offer a wider tent as long as their revised convictions don't result in less control, and an actual revision of their convictions. The healthcare industry wants to heal people as long as healing doesn't disrupt the comfort of profits, high salaries, and precious research dollars. And Christians, yes us included, friends, want to buy into kingdom-living as long as it doesn't disrupt our ability to operate freely in Caesar's markets.

This morning, Peter is beginning to understand, that when he proclaims the Lordship of Christ, he's no longer worried about being fixed, or belonging to a system that thinks it's fixed; instead, Peter is longing to be saved.

And stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Don't let your mind go there. Not saved from sin. Not saved from unworthiness. Not saved like he's some transaction in Caesar's ledger.

But saved. Given space to live into his potential. Given space, to see over and around the temple walls to the provisions of Mt. Hermon; Given space to step out

of the shadows of Caesar's palace and feel the warm sunshine of God's love; Given space to move beyond Caesar's definition of citizenship to hear his real value as a child of God; Given space to see power, love, and hope, not in displays of force and strength, nor the in awe of brick and mortar, but instead in the raw, vulnerable, weird, quirky, joyful, messy, totally-human relationships of his neighbors. Peter is free to be the Peter God created him to be.

When we proclaim Christ's Lordship, we are not condemning or indicting Caesar's systems; we are not dismissing the ability of government, businesses, or private organizations to make impactful change; we are not seeking to be apolitical. I believe, that when we proclaim the Lordship of Christ, we are rightly identifying the source of our being, the hope for our souls; I think we are elevating source above mechanism; I think we are freeing ourselves to transform systems, not to let systems transform us. We don't need a president, or a corporation, or a hospital, or a school system to know God's goodness; but if we know and believe in God's goodness, we can become empowered to help create, transform, and influence mechanisms like presidencies and industries to reflect God's goodness for all.

At the foot of a mighty mountain, the view obstructed by Caesar's temple, Peter identified true Lordship. And then he spent a lifetime seeking to trust in the life-giving sustainability of that source. Good friends, may God equip each of us with the same desire to search for and trust in Christ's Lordship!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.