

Semicontinuous  
**Prov. 1:20–33**  
**Ps. 19**

Complementary  
**Isa. 50:4–9a**  
**Ps. 116:1–9**  
**or Wis. 7:26–8:1**

**Jas. 3:1–12**

**Mark 8:27–38**

# Who Do You Say That I Am?

**Goal for the Session** *Adults will ponder the disciples’ response to Jesus’ question, “Who do people say that I am?” and form their own responses.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Mark 8:27–38

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Sharon H. Ringe

In Mark’s Gospel, though, Jesus is not portrayed as marching forward on a campaign that has been clear from the beginning. The time of sorting in the wilderness following his baptism by John the Baptist (1:12–13) appears as the first step in a process during which Jesus himself is portrayed as clarifying his mission and realizing bit by bit the depth and breadth of its implications. “Who do people say that I am?” would have been an appropriate vehicle by which to identify the next steps in his ministry. In this case, the response places him clearly in the line of prophetic spokespersons anointed to bring God’s word to the people.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Martha L. Moore-Keish

No matter how we interpret the place of suffering in the atonement, this passage makes it clear that the title “Messiah” is being reinterpreted. This helps illumine why Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (v. 33). Although this might suggest a strong dualism of divine and human worlds, it is better understood as a clash of understandings of what it means to be Messiah. According to human conceptions of “Messiah,” suffering should be conquered rather than embraced, but according to “divine things,” suffering and death are necessary to being God’s anointed.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Harry B. Adams

The experience of Peter serves as an alert for us. We can indeed use our experience of relating to other people as an analogy for how we can relate to Jesus, and we can express our understanding of who he is for us in various ways. But when we speak of Jesus and who he is for us, we need to do so with the humility and the reserve that comes from awareness that we may have the title right but may not fully understand its meaning. What does it mean for us if we call Jesus Savior? What does it mean for us if we call Jesus Son of God? What does it mean for us if we too call Jesus Messiah?

#### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Nathan G. Jennings

Regardless of the possibility that years of Sunday school have properly indoctrinated us into the “right” answers about who Jesus is and the meaning of his life, the radical new meaning of being the Messiah found in this text is not what we inherently wish for or expect at a fundamental level as human beings, given our fallen condition. But only when we have heard the true meaning of what it means to be the Messiah are we in a place to hear his call to us: follow me. Discipleship, therefore, is the necessary outcome of confessing *this* Jesus to be the Messiah.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Mark 8:27–38**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Many North Americans still live where Christianity is the dominant religion and being a Christian may be taken for granted. Increasingly, however, Americans are encountering neighbors of other religions or no religion at all. While many fear the loss of belonging to the dominant religion, an advantage of losing a homogenous Christian culture is that it causes us to clarify just what we believe and not take it for granted. Today's focus scripture challenges participants to consider what following Jesus might involve. Some participants may welcome exploring the risks while others may resist stepping onto such a challenging road.

*Prepare in me an open heart, O God, that I may bear witness to you. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- masking tape
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 19, 2021

### For Responding

- option 1: index cards, pens
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2, pens
- option 3: clipboards, survey papers, pens

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, copy these definitions on newsprint sheets and display them for Exploring: *John the Baptist*: a New Testament prophet from the desert who proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom; some confused the work of John the Baptist with the work of Jesus; some viewed Jesus as John's replacement after his death at the hand of Herod. *Elijah*: a prophet from the Old Testament period who was expected to return, restoring God's people and their relationship with God. *Prophet*: a person who revealed God's will and purpose, calling people to live by the instructions received from God. *Messiah*: one expected to totally change the world. There were many diverse speculations about the type of person this messiah would be, including a king, a priest, a heavenly figure. *Christ*: (Hebrew translation = Messiah) anointed one, one commissioned by God for a special task, often used as a functional title for Jesus.

Welcome participants and invite them to form pairs. Have one person in each pair ask the other, "Who are you?" After an initial response, repeat the question four times, encouraging the responder to give deeper information with each answer. Switch roles within the pairs, repeating the same question five times. Assure participants that they need only reveal information about themselves as they feel comfortable.

Gather the group and invite participants' comments on the experience of revealing who they are. Tell them that in this session they will ponder the different ways that Jesus was known by his followers.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

*There are so many ways to be known, Holy God, and you know each of us, through and through. Guide us this day that we may come to know you better. In Christ, we pray. Amen.*

## EXPLORING

Invite a volunteer to read Mark 8:27–38. Focus on the discussion between Jesus and his disciples in verses 27–28. Ask:

- ✪ What initial question does Jesus ask his disciples?
- ✪ What answers do the disciples give?

Show the definitions posted on newsprint. These are the responses the disciples gave to Jesus' question. Invite volunteers to read them aloud. Ask:

- ✪ In what ways was Jesus a prophet like John the Baptist and Elijah?
- ✪ What stories from Jesus' life and ministry can you recall that illustrate this?

In Mark, Jesus tells those who understand his identity as Messiah not to tell others about it. Biblical scholars call this the Messianic Secret. Jesus' followers must discover this secret identity on their own as they come to know Jesus for themselves.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 8:27–38) and read the "What?" excerpt. Ask:

- ✪ How does Peter's answer, obviously the correct one, differ from the others' answers?
- ✪ Why did Jesus want to keep Peter's answer a secret?

Call attention to verses 31–33. Ask:

- ✪ Why do you think Peter was so upset with Jesus' description of what was to happen to him as Messiah?
- ✪ What stories do you remember from any of the Gospels that confirm Jesus' predictions?

*Jesus' Passion Predictions:* Jesus as Messiah cannot be fully understood without acknowledging and sharing in Jesus' suffering. Three times in Mark, Jesus tells his disciples about the suffering he must endure. Such suffering will be followed by Jesus' triumphant resurrection.

Read and discuss the "Where?" excerpt from the resource sheet. Discuss how Jesus was reinterpreting the common understanding of Messiah. Ask:

- ✪ How did Jesus' explanation of Messiah and suffering challenge his followers?

Explain that 8:27–33 may seem confusing but it leads to a clear description of what it means to follow Jesus. Review 8:34–38. Have participants pretend they are one of Jesus' disciples listening to him speaking to the crowds. Ask:

- ✪ What do you think the crowd is thinking?
- ✪ What concerns do these verses raise for you personally?

To transition to Responding, read the "So What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Discuss:

- ✪ What does it mean today for people to call Jesus the Messiah and follow him?
- ✪ What examples of following Jesus have you witnessed?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Who Is Jesus?** This activity encourages adults to think about how they answer the question of who Jesus is. Distribute index cards and pens. Have participants write their responses on their index card as you pose the question, "Who is Jesus?" Repeat the question five times. Instruct the participants to write different responses each time the question is posed.

**EASY  
PREP**

Conclude the activity with one final question: “What does it mean for you to follow Jesus?” Have participants write their response on the back of their card and specify one thing they will do as a follower of Jesus. Have them take their cards home as a reminder of their commitment.

- 2. Follow the Leader** This activity challenges adults to think deeply about the ramifications of following the Messiah. Have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask: What does it mean to heed Jesus’ call to follow him?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Follow the Leader) and have participants read it silently. Invite brief comments. Ask:

- ✪ What does it mean today to “participate in the pattern of the suffering Messiah?”
- ✪ How do we domesticate Jesus with a “softer” gospel?
- ✪ What might the “kingdom of God which Jesus ushers in” look like today?
- ✪ What is our role in helping to bring in God’s kingdom?

Following group discussion, distribute pens and have participants answer the For Reflection questions at the bottom of Resource Sheet 2. Encourage them to take their sheets home as a reminder of their commitment.

- 3. Survey Disciples** This activity allows participants to discover what fellow congregants say about who Jesus is. Plan to conduct an informal survey of people in your congregation, posing the same question that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

Decide on a convenient time to conduct the survey. This may be before or after a worship service, during Sunday school classes, or during coffee hour. Determine if you will gather responses from adults, youth, or children. Assign participants to conduct the surveys. Discuss if and how you will share survey results with the pastor.

Distribute clipboards, paper, and pens to participants. Gather survey responses from congregants. Plan to discuss results during the next session. In preparation for the discussion, prepare a piece of newsprint with the following headings so that types of responses may be checked: personal savior and friend, suffering servant, prophet, Messiah who saves the world. Leave room for other replies.

## CLOSING

Gather participants in a circle and invite each person to make one statement about who Jesus is.

As a closing charge, read aloud Philippians 2:5–11.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 19, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

September 12, 2021

Who Do You Say  
That I Am?



Adult  
Resource Sheet 1

## Focus on Mark 8:27–38

### WHAT is important to know?

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September 12, 2021

Who Do You Say  
That I Am?



Adult  
Resource Sheet 2

## Follow the Leader

### Discipleship = following the leader

Paraphrase of Mark 8:34–35: Jesus said to his disciples, “To become my follower, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. Lose your life for my sake, for the sake of the gospel—this will save you.”

“Are there those who would deny that Jesus is the Messiah, or simply relativize the radical meaning of following this Jesus? Does our community want a ‘softer’ gospel? Would some like to see Jesus as blending in nicely with current political, economic, and social norms?”

“Or, worse, do we find the radical political, social, and economic ramifications of this kind of Messiah easy to smooth over into a ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild’ who is unconcerned with such earthly matters?”

“Are there some who are unable to see that, as radically political, social, and economic the ramifications of Jesus as Messiah might be, these flow out of and are defined by the greater world of the kingdom of God that Jesus ushers in, and not the other way around?”

“Are there some who would find the cost of discipleship a little too ‘cheap’? Or who see the call to discipleship as nothing more than a call to radical social reform, rather than a participation in the pattern of the suffering Messiah?”

—From Nathan G. Jennings, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 71.

“This text demands from faithful readers a decision: will we follow this man to the place that he is going? It therefore demands that [we] convey the reality and urgency of this decision in the life of the individual congregant and in the life of the congregation as a whole. That may well be a cross for [us] to bear.”

—From Nathan G. Jennings, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 73.

### For Reflection:

What does it mean to follow *this* Jesus, the Messiah?

What will you deny and what cross will you take up as a disciple of Jesus?

