

A sermon preached on September 16th, 2018 based upon Mark 8:27-37.

The Bible is often presented as the "answer book." Pat Robertson is happy to sell you a book he wrote entitled *"Answers to 200 of Life's Most Probing Questions"* in which he explains the answers you might have missed from your reading of the Bible.

Although there is certainly a sense in which the Bible can at times provide "answers" there is something misleading in primarily seeing the Bible as an "Answer Book." There is for one thing a big difference between having the "right" answer and then living with integrity in relation to that answer.

This morning's story occurs midway through Mark's Gospel and describes the first time a human gave "the right answer" to the question, "Who is Jesus?" Peter declares to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." It's the right answer, but curiously Jesus sternly warns Peter and the other disciples not to repeat it to anyone.

Another curious thing is that although it is the first time a human has declared these words, there have been a number of times already with evil spirits have demonstrated that they already know the "right answer." As Jesus is about to deliver them from some poor soul, they scream, "What have you come to do to us? We know who you are, the son of God!" Though they know the truth, they aren't living out of that truth. They aren't followers of Jesus.

It is striking that the very first line of Mark's Gospel already gives us the "right" answer: *"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."* If all that were needed was the "right answer" then Mark would have put down his pen right there. But note the first part of the sentence: "the beginning of the Good News..." In other words, *sit back and settle in to listen to the story I have to tell.*

Perhaps it is better to describe the Bible as a "story book" than and an "answer book." It's not a set of doctrines to believe but a story to engage with. And the thing about a good story is that it doesn't provide a simple one-time-fits-all answer to the question "what does the story mean?"

So Mark tells us this story of the mysterious man named Jesus who healed the sick and delivered those held in bondage to evil and reached out to those who had been scorned, and when he taught did so primarily by telling stories. And midway through his ministry he chose to go to Jerusalem where forsook violence and willingly laid down his life to the violence of the religious and Roman authorities. The story didn't end there, however. Somehow, someway God raised this mysterious man from the dead.

Notice the peculiar way Mark ends his Gospel. *"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* (Mark 16:8) What kind of ending is that!? It's not one. And that's the point.

The story doesn't end there -- it continues right to this moment with us asking the question of how we fit into the story of Jesus and the mystery of his ongoing presence.

So perhaps it would be better to call the Bible a "question book" rather than an "answer book." It is a book in which questions are addressed to us. In our story this morning there are three questions. The first is an easy one – the sort that you can use Google or Wikipedia to answer. Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples know how to answer that one: Elijah, John the Baptist, one of the prophets.

The second question is harder because it is deeply personal. "And who do you say that I am?" Peter gives the "right" answer and initially seems to have aced the exam, but in short order he wins himself the strongest rebuke an individual ever received from Jesus when he shows his utter inability to understand what the "right" answer will mean. This will be in some sense a life long exam.

The third question is another question you don't answer once and for all. "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but to forfeit their life?" In the course of my days, what is worthy to be the focus of our energies? There are many a preacher (sometimes perhaps including myself) who while holding a Bible in their hand convey an absolute certainty that they are preaching the "right answer" when in truth what they are actually trying to do is gain their own personal version of "the whole world" – a huge flock of adoring followers.

So let's return to Peter. Notice the variety of answers he might have given in the course of his life to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

You're the one who said, "Come face your fears and walk on the water with me."

You're the one when I began to sink caught me before I drowned.

You're the one who washed my feet as a servant while I squirmed in shame for my claims of personal grandeur.

You're the one who accurately told me what a coward I'd be the very night you needed me to be brave.

You're the one who found me on the beach and spoke words that loved me out of self-contempt.

You're the one who in the end said to me, "Feed my sheep."

In the end faith isn't having all the answers figured out. It's a deep trust in spite of knowing so little that the one who is asking us the deepest questions has our best interests at heart.

There's a question that's so difficult to answer that any attempt to do so in any final way is kind of an abomination. The question I have in mind is: "Why does a good and loving God allow there to be so much pain and suffering in this world?"

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian writer who survived living in a Nazi

concentration camp in Ravenstock during World War II. In her autobiography she described the horrific conditions of the camp: thousands of women cold and hungry and lice-ridden living in cramped quarters. She describes a Bible Study that her sister Betsy was leading in their barracks during which a woman sitting apart high up on her bunk suddenly becomes enraged.

"If your God is such a good God," she screamed, "why does he allow this kind of suffering?" Dramatically the woman tore off the old rags that had bandaged her hands, displaying her broken, mangled fingers and said, "I'm the first violinist of the symphony orchestra. Did your God will this?"

For a moment no one answered. Finally Corrie spoke up. "We can't answer that question. All we know is that our God came to this earth, and became one of us, and he suffered with us and was crucified and died. And that he did it for love."

After rebuking Peter for his presuming to know that the way of the cross wasn't necessary, Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

It is natural that in our journey with Jesus that we would ask him to help us in various ways. We seek his help in having our needs met and solving our problems. But perhaps somewhere along the way a shift of focus begins to take place. We ask less for Jesus to come and solve our problems and begin to ask more, "Jesus, how can I serve you in this place I find myself?"

This past Summer I found myself thrust into a challenging situation that I would never have chosen for myself. It caused me a great deal of distress. But at a certain point a friend asked, "What might God be asking of you in these circumstances?"

Contemplating the possible answers to the question helped. Something shifted inside me. I felt less urgency to resolve the situation and more desire to find how I could bear witness to God's love in the midst of the circumstances I found myself facing. And it was all a matter of asking a different question.

One of my favorite Bible stories comes from the book of Acts. Paul and Silas are preaching the Gospel in a certain city and run afoul of the authorities. They are arrested and beaten and thrown into jail. Their legs shackled and their bodies bruised in the total darkness of midnight the impression we get is that they aren't consumed with asking Jesus to deliver them from this hell hole. Rather we are told that in the darkness they sang songs of praise to God, and it captured the attention of the other prisoners sitting there with them in the darkness. I suspect that rather than worrying about how are we going to get out of this mess? they were asking, "How can I serve Jesus in this place?"

Sometimes when we can shift from demanding an answer or a resolution to a problem to a posture of asking how God is already present, and how might we serve Jesus in this space, room opens up for the Spirit to move. And that is what happened for Paul and Silas. Suddenly there was an earthquake and the shackles that held all the prisoners were broken open. The jailer seeing that the prisoners for whom he was responsible were now able to flee drew his sword and was about to kill himself until Paul commanded him not to harm himself and assured him they weren't focused on fleeing. Paul proceeded to share the Gospel with the jailor and that night he became a follower of Jesus.

When you find yourself in a situation that seems dark and hopeless, what might it mean for you to ask, "What does it mean in this place of darkness to take up my cross and follow?"