

Year A Proper 16  
The Rev. Canon Timothy Watt+  
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Exodus 1:8-2:10  
Psalm 124  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer: AMEN

In today's gospel, Jesus is at the end of the northern reach of Israel... Caesarea Philippi sits in the far north of the Holy Land. Today the area is the point where the Israeli Occupied West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon all come together. It is at the base of the tallest mountain in the area: Mount Hermon. That mountain is the source of the River Jordan. Mt. Hermon's snow-packed peak melts each spring and its ice-cold run-off is absorbed

into the mountain... seeping down... down... through its secret depths... through its natural filters of granite and sandstone... until purified artesian waters **burst** forth from the springs at the base of the mountain... the largest of these springs is found at a place that's now called Banias... The modern name hearkens to the crumbling archaeological ruins there... a large temple complex in honor of Pan... the Greek god of nature and music...

The temple was first built by the Greek colonizers after the conquest of the area by Alexander the Great. They believed that it was Pan who gave all the abundant gifts of the natural wilderness to humanity... so it was a

logical choice to offer sacrifice to his idol at the springs of the very river that gives life along the Jordan's path.

But human empires are vanity... They fall and new ones rise... In time the Romans colonized the Greeks. When that happened, the temple was rededicated to ***THE*** individual that the Romans held as the ultimate living son of the Gods... Caesar himself. The idol to Pan was torn down... and an Imperial idol of Caesar rose in its place.

It was brilliant politico-religious propaganda... Caesar was the living man-god from whom all blessings flowed: the waters he allowed to flow gave life to the Galilee before continuing on down, watering crops throughout

Judea to the Dead Sea... it was a mirror of the Roman economy that sustained commerce in the money that flowed from Caesar's treasury... his image stamped on each coin. The lesson was clear: Without Caesar's blessing, everything would dry up... crumble... blow away... without Caesar, waters do not flow, commerce crashes and everyone becomes very poor... so, don't challenge Caesar...

Jesus never respected that memo... He knew that all things flowed from God... from his own being... that everything created is gift intended for all... As our Prayer Book so beautifully puts it: All things come of thee, O Lord... here, in this story from Matthew, Jesus openly challenges the fake news of the Roman political

propaganda machine...

Knowing full well whose idolatrous image stood yards away at the headwaters of the Jordan, Jesus stops to ask his disciples... to ask us... a simple question: Who do people say that I am? The answers roll out: John the Baptist raised from the dead, or Elijah who they believed would appear at the end of time... or any of the other prophets of old...

BUT then comes THE question... asked of the disciples... but also asked of us today... “But who do you say that I am?” The GREAT I AM asks this of each of us... Jesus, the Word of God made flesh to dwell with us, teach us, redeem us... to love us to the fullest measure... demands

our answer... Who is Jesus? Who do we say he is really?  
Is he just a prophet... just a moral teacher? Or do we  
acknowledge the truth that he is the wellspring of all  
life?

Now... this is Matthew's version. This event is recalled  
in each of the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark,  
and Luke. Each one is slightly different. Any trial lawyer  
will tell you this happens when multiple witnesses  
recall an incident. No account is quite the same.

Mark simply has Peter exclaiming, "You are the  
Messiah!" In recounting this event Luke goes further:  
You are the Messiah of God! But today, Matthew trumps  
them all when Peter exclaims: You are the Messiah. The

Son of the Living God... A bold proclamation about who Jesus REALLY is and why we follow him in the work of building his kingdom.

A primary title claimed by the Caesars was "Son of God". It was stamped into their coins in many cases, "Deus Filius" ... just under the idol of their face. So, it is exemplary that Peter rushes in to answer without hesitation, exclaiming: You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God... The one sent to save. God's own true son is Jesus, not Caesar. Peter has revealed the true identity of Christ, forever focusing our view toward the kingdom of God instead of the passing nations of Earth.

In all three gospel accounts... regardless of what Peter reportedly says, Jesus' reply is always the same: He affirms Peter's acclamation and then sternly orders them not to tell anyone... not yet. The world would not be able to handle the truth of it... not yet...

Jesus says this because he knew what they did not... He knew that this trip to Caesarea Philippi in the northernmost part of the Holy Land was the beginning of his great journey south toward Jerusalem and to the Cross. From this point Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem to redeem us and change history forever. His march south initiates the Kingdom of God in through his ministry, death, and resurrection. There can be no more Caesars to claim the title that belongs to Christ alone:

Son of God. We are his body on Earth, the Church, who, through our adoption in Jesus can also claim to be children of the living God. Now no one may be excluded; Jesus has forever opened the way of the Kingdom of God and everyone is invited if they only accept.

In Jesus' response to Peter, the Church has been handed the Keys to the Kingdom. Whatever is bound on Earth is bound in Heaven. Whatever is Loosed on earth is loosed in heaven.

Standing at the foot of Mount Hermon, Jesus is proclaiming that the rift between the created order and heaven, the dimension of God, has come to an end through what he is doing through his life, death and

resurrection... And everything that stands against that, all the Caesars great and small, will not prevail against the reunification of heaven and earth. Whom will we serve? The false Caesar or the True Son?

This is what we share with the world now, today. We belong to Christ who *is*, not to Caesar... a mortal man who was and is no longer... Rome and its statues have fallen. Christ and his kingdom have not... for here we are...

During today's Gospel the world shifts. There must be no more pharaohs who forget the good works of past generations and subjugate their heirs...

Trinity Church is old enough to have witnessed the rise and fall of empires. And through it all we have stood as a light to the community. We are Trinity Church. Let us continue to be a light on the hill shining our gospel truth through worship, study, and service.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The source of light and all that is. Put your trust in him and render unto Caesar what is Caesar's: vanity, dust, and ancient ruins... Live for Jesus Christ and your part to play in his Body, the Church. Do THAT which your heart is being called to do. This week, commit to be silent for a while and listen to that call... Then get to work doing it... because the Church needs that gift from you in order to be complete. AMEN