

SERMON – September 17, 2006
Mark 8 “Jesus – Messiah”

G&P.....

When I born according to the witnesses that were present, namely my mother and the nurses and doctor, I had quite a bit of trauma coming into the world. My mother tells me that at one point my heart became very faint, the umbilical cord had wrapped around my neck and the longer the labor, the more I was choking. Now the doctor did what he needed to do along with great nurses and I came into the world a bit blue, but alive none the less.

This could explain why at times closed places give me the Willy's. But when I was born I was given any identity. My parents named me Paul after the apostle, and Thomas the middle name of my mothers father. Hadland came with the territory. But I was named. Then in December on the second Sunday of Advent I was named again.

This time I received another identity. Child of God. I was baptized into God's name: Father , Son, and Holy Spirit. I had two identities, though they would grow into one and the same identity. Sunday School was apart of the plan and so was church. We worshiped as a family, always sitting half way up the aisle on the pulpit side.

I was a child of God. Then things began to change. I applied for and got my first job as a newspaper boy for the Duluth Herald, an afternoon route with 96 papers, on the steepest streets in East Duluth. I remember battling dogs on that route, the ankle biters were the worse. The owner once told me, “Oh, she never bites.” as the little penny dog had a hold of my canvas paper carrier. She did let go on the third approach as I swung my bag around, she landed in 4 feet of snow buried and yelping for the owner to come out. Tips came in the form of dimes in those days. I hated collecting the bill, but I became known as the paperboy. Another identity.

I had to get a social security number at that time so that taxes could be taken out of my small salary. I was now a number in the system, a national number that would come up again when I had to file for the draft at the end of the Viet Nam war. My draft number at that time was 086. Not a good number to have, but the draft was done just as I was graduating from High School.

I was a graduate of Duluth East high school. But life came to me in my involvement in the church at First Lutheran by the lake. No matter what I was doing, no matter what identity I had whether it was canoe guide in the BWCAW or student or pastor. The one identity that stuck and remained always the same: Paul Thomas, child of God.

This is who I am and you have the same identity: Say your name, and all say “Child of God.”

That is your identity. You probably have much more colorful stories than I do. But the bottom line remains, we belong to God in and through Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the scripture lesson for this morning. Jesus has his disciples around him, they have walked up in to the region of Caesaria Phillipi which lies north of the sea of Galilea. This is gentile country, this is a culture that worships idols and gods such as Pan the god of the under world. Jesus addresses his disciples in a very pointed way:

“What are the people saying about me? My Identity?”

The disciples have all heard the scuttle butt.

“Some say that you are John the Baptist, others say that you are Elijah, and some say that you are one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus looks into their hearts and asks:

“Who do say that I am?”

Peter, brave Peter, Peter who cannot keep his mouth shut says:

“You are the Christ of God, the messiah!”

Jesus tells them to hold this in their hearts and not breathe a word to anyone, yet. Then he tells them that he must suffer at the hands of those in power and be put to death and on the third day rise again.

Peter cannot handle this word, it is a tough and difficult word and it makes no sense for Jesus to die. He grabs Jesus and tells him that this cannot happen.

But Jesus confronts Peter:

“Follow me, Peter, and be centered on the things of God. Satan, be gone!”

He called the whole crowd together:

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You are not in the drivers seat, I am. Don't run from suffering: embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Be centered in God your creator who saves. What good would it do to get everything that you want and lose you, the real you? What could you trade your soul for?

Pick up your cross and follow me.

The disciples are bewildered at this teaching, but they stay the course with Jesus. They indeed will see him come into his glory as he dies on the cross. They will see and finally understand as he stands in that locked room on the night of resurrection as he shows them his hands and his side and feet, the marks of his glory.

Jesus has an identity that he wants all of us and the world to know about. He is the savior of the world. He is your savior, he is your Lord. He is the messiah of God so that we might know how to love God and each other. He is the one who continuously breaks into our lives with forgiveness and grace. He is the one who challenges our thinking like he did Peter, always showing us how we can live grace in our lives. How we can be forgiving people who are living out the forgiveness that Jesus has given to us in our first identities, child of God.

But there is work being done in this world right now that wants to steal our identities. There is a whole industry being created right now to help stop Identity Theft. People we know in this community have had their worlds turned upside down because someone got their identity out of trash can or a computer in the bank. This evil wreck havoc with our lives. They have to change everything and it can take for years.

There is also an evil that wants to change and destroy our lives as well. I think about these monsters who steal children and make them believe that their parents do not love them. The girl who was held captive by a very sick man in Germany for 8 years until she was able to escape, tells such a sad tale. There is evil out there that must be confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ and put to death.

But there is also that which lies within each of us that must also die, that must also be put to death. I grew up with the mantra, Don't get mad, Get Even.! That must die, that tendency within each of us for revenge, must die. That tendency within each of us to hold onto to our anger as a badge of hurt must die. That tendency to blame others for our situation when the solution lies within our own abilities. We must die to the way the world lives, eye for an eye, a bomb for a bomb, a death for a death. We must open our eyes to the grace of One who called us by name even before we were born, to the grace of the One who rejoiced in heaven with all of the angels at the time of our baptisms, to the grace who opens our eyes to see each other as people for whom Jesus died and was raised.

In a sermon on truth-telling, Bill Hybels recounts a story told by Brennan Manning in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.

Brennan Manning quite courageously admits that 25 years ago, he had a drinking problem. He voluntarily entered a 28-day treatment program. Early on in the treatment program they had to sit in a circle with a leader and tell the truth to themselves, and to the other people in the group, about the extent of their drinking.

So they went around the circle and they all told the truth, except for one business guy named Max. When it came time for him to reveal the extent of his drinking, he said, "I

never really drank that much."

They said, "Max, you're in an alcoholic treatment center for a month. You weren't sipping cokes. Tell the truth to yourself. Admit it."

He said, "I'm being honest with you. I've never really had all that much to drink."

They had signed affidavits to be able to get information. Max had signed one, too. They could glean information in any way they so desired. So they had a speaker phone in the center of the circle, and the leader of the group said, "I'm going to call the bartender close to your office and we'll just find out."

So they called the bartender and the leader says to the person on the phone, "Do you know Max So-and-So?" The guy says, "Oh, like a brother! He stops in every day after work and has a minimum of six martinis. Man, this guy drinks like a fish! He's the best customer we have—a prolific consumer of alcohol."

The rest of the people in the group all looked at Max. And now here's a moment of truth. Max tells the truth to himself. He says, "Yes, I've had a lot to drink."

A little later on in the group, they asked everyone, "Have you ever hurt anybody, a friend or family member, while you were drunk?"

Some people said, yes, and they described it. Other people said, no. They tried to get at the truth, and if that was the truth, that was the truth. They get all the way around to Max, who says, "I would never, ever hurt anybody. Not when I'm sober, not when I'm drunk. I have four lovely children. I'd never hurt my wife, I'd never hurt my kids."

The leader says, "You know, Max, we don't believe you. We're going to call your wife." As soon as Max's wife starts talking on the speaker phone, Max starts breathing heavily. He knows something's coming that he has been unwilling to face.

The leader says, "Mrs. So-and-So, has Max ever mistreated you or anyone in the family when he was drunk?" And she said, "Well, yes he has. It happened just this last Christmas Eve. He took our 9-year-old daughter shopping on Christmas Eve, bought her a new pair of shoes; he's a generous man. On the way home, our little girl was sitting in the front seat enjoying her new shoes, and Max passed the bar and saw the cars of some of his buddies.

"He pulled in. It was a cold, wintry day, 12 degrees, with a high wind chill. He made sure all the windows were rolled up snugly. He left the car running so that the heater was blowing, and he said to our 9-year-old daughter, 'I'll be right back. You just play with your shoes; I'll be right back.'

"He went in the bar and started drinking with his buddies. He didn't come out of the bar until midnight. In that time, the vehicle had shut off and the windows had become all frosted over and locked up tight so she couldn't get herself out of the car. When the authorities opened up the car and rushed her to the hospital, she was so badly frostbitten that her thumb and forefinger had to be amputated. And her ears were so damaged by the

cold that she'll be deaf for the rest of her life."

The wife describes this to the group, and Max falls off his chair and starts convulsing on the ground. He just couldn't bear telling himself the truth about what he had done. He couldn't face it. He was going to live the rest of his life in some fantasy world of denial about what he had done.

Bill Hybels, "Telling Yourself the Truth" (4-14-02); submitted by Gino Grunberg, Gig Harbor, Washington

It was in that moment of dying that his life began to change. It was in that moment of dying to his past that his recovery became real. It was in that moment of dying to all the hurt of the past that enslaves us that he was being raised to new life. Oh, he made amends, he would walk a tough walk, but it was in that moment of dying that grace became real.

We gather around the altar this morning with all the stuff that we need to die to. Jesus calls us to give it to him, so that we might know resurrection, that we might have that taste of heaven in the body and blood of Jesus. Come to the altar and die and be made alive again in Jesus.

This is the power that of grace that keeps us centered on the one who brings life now, and life to come in the resurrection. Grace that sustains us in times when we cannot take another step. Grace that centers us always on the One who gives us life in Jesus' name.

AMEN