

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, February 15, 2026

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I invite you to get comfy in your pews and to take a couple of deep breaths with me. So, take a deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies.

Breathe out God's mercies to others. Breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That by your power you would quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For those who haven't been with us for a while or perhaps are joining us for the very first time in worship, you should know that throughout the season of Epiphany, we have moved through a sermon series entitled, Who Do You Say I Am? It's a question that Jesus posed of the disciples, of those who had followed him and seen his ministry in action. It is a question that is asked in the middle of the Gospel of Mark and also in the 16th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. And so we encourage you if you...if you've been away or just joined us for the first time, you can find all the sermons on our YouTube page. You can go back and you can see how together over the last several weeks we have been building together a Christology, a fuller understanding of the heart and the person of Jesus Christ, the one in whom our faith rests. So this day we read of this question that Jesus posed in Matthew, chapter 16, starting in the 13th verse.

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Cesaria Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." Jesus said to them, "But who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

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*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we have been entertaining this question that we hear, but we haven't really set the question in the particular context in which it was asked. Jesus asks this question in the midst of the region of Caesarea Philippi. It's important for us because those who would have been hearing the question for the first time would have understood the meaning of place. Caesarea Philippi a place of political power and a place of pagan worship. In that area there were temples made to a pagan god, and of course the city was named for Caesar. Everywhere one looked in that city there were competing answers to the question "Who is Lord?" It is into this context that Jesus asks, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" And the disciples report *public opinion*. This is important. *Public opinion*. Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, some say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. These are safe answers from the disciples, honorable answers and yet incomplete answers.

And so then Jesus pivots.

But who do *you* say I am? And in an instant, the question takes on a different weight. Deeply personal and yet with far-reaching implications. Who do *you* say I am? The answer that Peter offers has the same deeply personal and yet far-reaching implications. "You are the Messiah. You are the son of the living God."

In response, Jesus says, "Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven." Jesus's response seems to say that this answer that Peter has given is not simply one that he has constructed. It is a gift from God, a revelation from God that he would be able to claim that indeed Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God. Over the last six weeks, we have been building this Christology. But it's really really important for us to understand that this isn't some intellectual exercise. We are simply opening ourselves, preparing ourselves for something that can only be understood as divinely inspired, divine revelation. Because understanding Jesus as the Messiah is not something that we can reason our way into. It is something that can only be revealed to us. Over six weeks, we have said that Jesus is the word made flesh, the image of God. Jesus is teacher and healer. Jesus is the crucified one and the risen one. But for us to truly understand, for us to truly embody these identities, none of those conclusions can be reached by our own cleverness or ingenuity. They must be disclosed to us. God must show us who God is.

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We cannot construct a Christology. We can only receive it. And as we receive this revelation of who Christ is, our lives like Peter's, like the disciples, our lives are changed. And not just that, our view of the world changes as well because if we claim as Peter did that indeed Jesus is the Messiah, then our lives and our allegiances must be reordered. When Peter said "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God," he was not saying to Jesus, you are an inspirational leader. He is claiming something that the people of Israel have awaited throughout their long history—the Messianic promise that one would come, an anointed king that would liberate them, deliver them, free them. Peter says, "You are this one." And he says this, he makes this claim of this anointed king, this deliverer, liberator, in a city honoring Caesar as lord. Everywhere you look in the name itself, Peter declares that there is another Lord, a true Lord. And in so doing, he confesses his allegiance to Jesus over and against the allegiances of the world. His confession changes his loyalty because one cannot call Jesus the Messiah and keep Caesar as the ultimate sovereign.

One cannot call Jesus the Messiah and let injustice or comfort have sovereign place. Throughout this series, we've answered the question intellectually. This week, the question becomes existential. If Jesus is indeed the word made flesh, then truth has a face. If Jesus is indeed the image of God, then God looks like love and humility. God looks like grace and forgiveness. If Jesus is indeed the healer, then that healing, that compassion is indeed king and will have the final word. If Jesus is the crucified one, then power has been completely redefined. If Jesus is the risen one, then death has been defeated ultimately. If Jesus is the Messiah, then Jesus must reign.

And so, if this confession claims Peter's allegiance, then it must claim ours as well. If we are to answer this question in the same way that Peter does, that indeed Jesus is the Messiah, then it's going to reshape how we move through the world. It's going to reshape how we read the news. It's going to reshape how we show up for our neighbors. It's going to change how we spend money, how we forgive, how we lead, and even how we understand suffering. Because this claim is not simply another in a laundry list that has taken us six weeks to move through. It is the claim that holds all of the other pieces together. Messiah is not an add-on title. It is the integrated center of everything that we have said. If we remove Messiah from our claim of Christology, then we are left with only fragments. We have a moral teacher. We have a spiritual example. We have a tragic martyr. We have a mystical presence. But Messiah pulls all those fragments into a living, reigning whole.

On January 11th, we began this series. I told you that I'd gotten out of seminary, four years at Columbia Theological, without a fully developed Christology. Over the first couple years of my ministry, I developed one. Here's the thing. We can pass ordination exams. one could pass all the

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ordination exams without a fully developed Christology if one can simply regurgitate some of the things that are taught to them, right? One could do that.

You might have thought when I was talking about building a Christology that we were doing so as a theological exercise, but we have not been doing this study, this spiritual work to pass some sort of denominational ordination exam. We have done this study, this spiritual work because of the words that Jesus says just after Peter answers the question. Jesus upon hearing this proclamation, this confession from this disciple, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God,” he says, you've only said that because you have had it revealed to you by the living God. You have a new name now. You are not Simon Peter. You are simply Peter. And here's where we need to pay attention. “On this rock, I will build my church. On this rock I will build my church.” The word translated church is *ekklesia*. This is one of only two places in all of the Gospels where *ekklesia* is found. It means assembly, a gathered people under the authority of another. In this case, the authority of Christ. Because Peter answers as he does, he can claim Jesus's true identity as he does. Jesus chooses to build the *ekklesia* on Peter, not on his human intellect, but on the divine revelation that Peter dares to speak.

This question about identity is an important one because it shapes something, shapes something in the world. I love how Eric Barreto, professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, puts it. He says, "Questions of identity are at the center of the Gospels, both in narrative accounts and explicit identifications. The Gospels weave a number of portraits of Jesus. In so doing, the Gospel writers are not just interested in correctly defining who Jesus is, but in shaping a community molded in light of his actions and teachings.”

And so these questions of identity, “Who do you say I am?” are not just a matter of definition, but of formation, not just doctrine, but discipleship. For six weeks, we have asked the question, and today the answer stands before us. Not just teacher, not just healer, not just crucified, not just risen, but Messiah.

And Jesus wasn't interested only in the answer. He was interested in the transformational power of making the claim of who Christ is in shaping a community that would carry on the ministry in the world. And so we've been asking ourselves this question for six weeks, and it returns to us this day, deeply personal but with far-reaching implications.

Who do we say Christ is?

Who do those that God has seen fit to call to 1750 Union Avenue in the year of our Lord, 2026,

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Who do we say that Christ is?

Not who did Peter say Christ was, or who does culture tell us Christ is, but who do *we* say Christ is?

And if we dare to answer, as Peter did, that he is indeed the Messiah, the son of the living God, then we better be prepared for our lives to be changed both personally and communally. Because if the claim of Peter is true, then Jesus is not simply to be admired, but he is to be trusted. He is to be obeyed. He is to be worshiped. He is to be followed.

Soren Kierkegaard says that the church is really good at creating admirers of Jesus. But the job of the church is to create and to be followers of the Christ. The question for us this day is who do *we* say Christ is? And as we answer, as we claim together as our Reformed mothers and fathers have shaped our understanding, if we say that we believe that Christ is the word of God made flesh, then the word must take on flesh in the world. If we say that Christ is the Imago Dei, the image of God, then we know the characteristics that we are to reflect out into the world. If we say, as Mary told our children, that Jesus is teacher and healer, then we are to lift up wisdom and to be the hands that are balm to those who are in need of care this day. If we say that Jesus is the crucified one, then we will lift up humility over other images of power. If we say that Christ is the risen one, then we will look upon every dark and scary and seemingly dead place and say that the work of God is not done there. And if we say that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the son of the living God, then we'd best be prepared to have our lives changed, to have our community changed. It is Peter's answer that serves as the foundation for the church in the world, the *ekklesia*, 'you indeed are the body of Christ and individually members of it.' May we, as we answer this question, trust and believe that the one who posed it so many years ago is present with us even right now, shaping us to be that body in the world.

Let's pray together.

You don't call us to theological exercise. You call us to transformation in our lives and in the world, God. And we thank you for the various ways in which you have revealed and will reveal yourself in our lives and in the world. We thank you for the way in which your word takes on flesh in the person of Jesus, the way in which we can look upon him and see your reflection. The way in which we can be taught by him. The way in which we can be healed by him. The way in which we can know that death doesn't have the final word and that life always will. We thank you in a world that teaches us that there are all sorts of other authorities, other lords. You draw us

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back into the eternal reality that, indeed, in Christ the Messiah has come, the anointed king, who rules with grace and with compassion, who executes justice and righteousness, and who calls his people even in this time to do the same. Hear our confession this day that you are indeed the Messiah, the son of the living God. O Christ. Hear our confession and transform us to live into it more fully and honestly in this time. For we ask it in the name of Christ. Amen.