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“Who are you?”

Imagine someone asked you that question. You might begin by stating your name, but that doesn't seem to answer the question as you're asked again, “Yes, but *who* are you?”

“Well, I'm a Christian. I'm also an American. What else do you want to know?”

“Who are *you*?”

“Hum...I like classical music and detective stories, along with science fiction movies. Does that help you know who I am?”

“Tell me more.”

“I like to read books and play guitar, taking walks in the woods and camping under the stars.”

“Keep telling me more about yourself.”

“I like pizzas and Dairy Queen ice cream.”

“Thanks for telling me something about yourself. I'll keep checking in on you.”

That's essentially what happens each time we purchase something—the marketing analysts know more and more about us based on our shopping preferences. Soon online advertisements pop up to highlight things we've been researching online, as though they can anticipate our shopping interests, but

sometimes we may begin to wonder if they know too much about us, as was the case with the father of a teenage daughter who was frustrated by the marketing mail arriving in his home. He decided to complain directly to the store.

My daughter got this in the mail!” said the irate father to the Target department store manager. “She's still in high school, and you're sending her coupons for baby clothes and cribs? Are you trying to encourage her to get pregnant?”

The store manager examined the mailer with the daughter's name on it. He had no idea why the department-store chain had sent the teenager the baby-products mailer. He apologized to the father.

A week later it was the father's turn to apologize. He called the store manager back and explained that his daughter had just informed him she was expecting, after all.¹

How did the store know the girl was pregnant before her father? By tracking her shopping habits in their store, marketers could analyze her patterns and discern she was expecting a baby. If a woman buys a diaper bag and baby clothing and vitamin supplements, it's likely she may be expecting a baby.

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Sometimes marketers know more about us than we realize, and I wonder what information might have popped up about Jesus if marketers had they been present when Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say I am?”

- It’s been said Jesus is a healer, but he hasn’t purchased any medical supplies.
- It’s been said he’s a teacher, but Jesus hasn’t purchased any chalk, markers, paper, or other school supplies.
- It’s been said he fed a huge crowd, but I don’t see anywhere that’s he purchased a large amount of food supplies.
- It’s been said Jesus is a fisher of people, but I don’t see any purchase of fishing supplies.
- Based upon his purchases, we have no idea who this Jesus is!

When Jesus asked his disciples this question about his identity—“Who do people say I am?”—he asked it while traveling in Caesarea Philippi, a remote area about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, requiring a walk of several days. This place was long associated with the worship of pagan gods, and it’s there a temple had been built to honor the emperor, Caesar

Augustus, hence the *Caesarea* portion of the name of the location. The *Philippi* portion was named after Philip, the son of King Herod, who built a city in that location after his father died and left him the land.

Imagine the disciples trying to answer Jesus’ question, “Who do people say I am?”—which may have felt like a trick question. Jesus asked the question in a place known to honor pagan gods and named after a Roman emperor who believed himself to be divine. How could one compete with this status? The disciples didn’t want to compare Jesus to any of them, so how were they to answer?

Peter replied using imagery from his Jewish faith by calling Jesus the Messiah, a Hebrew word meaning “anointed one,” a term used to refer to someone anointed with oil when chosen by God to serve as a priest or king.

In contrast to shrines in honor of false gods and a corrupt political system of power and injustice, Jesus’ calling by God was one for healing and teaching about the loving nature of God.

Just to be sure the disciples understood that Jesus would not be like the power-hungry leaders enshrined around them, he told his disciples that he would

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undergo great suffering and would be killed, but that his death would not be the end of the story. Peter had a hard time understanding and tried to argue with Jesus, who told “get behind me,” trust God, even when the path gets difficult.

How many times have you felt you were doing the right thing, following God, living the way you’re supposed to live, only to encounter suffering? Maybe a financial disaster occurs, or an unforeseen accident leads to physical challenges. Maybe someone you love gets an illness with a very poor prognosis, and then you silently mumble, “Why, God? Do you really exist?”

Sometimes we’re afraid to express our doubts or questions, for we might be afraid that Jesus will tell us to get behind him like he did to Peter, but I wonder if getting behind Jesus means we get in line and continue to follow? Continue to trust? You may have even used the expression yourself, such as, “Can you get behind this idea?” meaning, “Can you support the idea?” Getting behind something can be a good idea, as one writer explained:

What I love about Jesus’ rebuke is that...it includes mercy. “Get behind me,” he says. And where else should a follower of Jesus be, but right behind

Jesus? Peter’s mistake is that he is out in front, trying to lead. “No, no, no, Jesus, come with me this way—the way to power is not through suffering.” Jesus...rebuke is harsh and swift: No Peter, I lead, you follow.²

But sometimes, we may feel reluctant to share our doubts, but even in the difficult times, God is with us, and it’s ok to grapple with our faith, for the struggle makes us stronger, just as pushing our bodies with exercise makes us physically stronger.

But I know, it’s hard—it’s not always easy to face the challenges that life throws our way...

Pastor: Hey! What are you doing down there??

Member: [eager to be alone] Nothing. It’s fine. Don’t worry.

Pastor: Well, I wasn’t worried until just now when you said not to worry...what’s going on?

Member: I told you it’s fine. [forcing a very bad fake smile]

Pastor: You can’t fool me. It’s ok, you can tell me what’s wrong.

Member: I don’t think I can.

Pastor: You can. I’m not going to care for you any less. It’s safe to tell me even if you are afraid it’s embarrassing.

Member: It’s so embarrassing, though.

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Pastor: It's hard when something feels embarrassing, but I've been there too. You don't have to hide. I will understand. I promise.

Member: You won't laugh at me?

Pastor: No, of course not.

Member: You won't care for me less?

Pastor: I don't think it's possible for me to stop caring for you! Stop freaking out, just tell me what's going on!

Member: Ok. [stands up, takes a deep breath to relax] Ok. I'm not sure I understand what is going on with Jesus.

Pastor: [sort of confused] What do you mean what is going on with Jesus?

Member: [said kind of in a hurry] Well, Jesus is the son of God, but he's also a dude walking around...and he is God, but he talks to God...and I'm just not sure how it all works and I'm worried that means I am not a good person of faith. [pants after done]

Pastor: [grins to himself] That is a lot of things to think about. Thanks for being willing to share that with me.

Member: You think I'm terrible, don't you?

Pastor: Of course not! I think you are really normal.

Member: You do?

Pastor: Totally! It can be really confusing! Jesus is both human and God—and has conversations with God. It can be hard to understand for anyone! Did you listen close to the scripture today?

Member: I thought I did...

Pastor: Did you hear that the disciples didn't even understand what Jesus was talking about?

Member: I guess I did hear that!

Pastor: See? Even the people right there as Jesus was teaching on earth had a hard time always understanding how exactly that all works. But I think it's ok. We don't have to understand how it all fits together. We just have to trust it on faith. Make sense?

Member: No. But I do feel better.

Pastor: I'm glad.

Member: Thanks for finding me and listening!³

¹ Adapted from Charles Duhigg, "How companies learn your secrets," *New York Times Magazine*, February 16, 2012. nytimes.com as quoted on Homileticonline.com, 9/16/18.

² Jason Byassee, "Get behind me, Satan," 9/22/09, <https://faithandleadership.com/jason-byassee-get-behind-me-satan>

³ Narrative Lectionary *Program 2 2019-20* Worship Resources, 2019, adapted.