

## **“Finding the Real Thing”**

August 24, 2008

Scripture: Isaiah 51:1-6; Matthew 16:13-20

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The other night I heard a story on NPR about a product that claims to draw the toxins out of our bodies through our feet. It seems you put this patch on your foot at night before going to bed and the next morning you remove it to find the remains of all the harmful metals and other toxins in your body. The reporter did just that. She put the patch, a nice white piece of gauzy material, on her foot and the next morning there it was, dark and filthy looking when she removed it. She took her used patch and a clean one to a lab for analysis. After dissolving away all the material from pieces of the two samples what was left, presumably, was the chemical makeup of whatever was in the patch. Trouble was, both samples were identical. The sample of the used patch was exactly the same as the sample from the clean one.

It was a scam. Turns out we don't actually secrete toxins from our bodies through our feet. The patch had changed colors through a chemical reaction to moisture; the same effect was achieved when it was held over steam from a boiling pan of water.

Well, claims like that aren't very new. There have always been people who want to sell us something claiming it's going to change our lives or help us in some way. And as P.T. Barnum said, "There's a sucker born every minute." There will always be folks willing to believe those claims, attracted to the allure of wealth or health, security or status. I suspect we'll be hearing a lot of those kinds of claims from now until November. And with all of that out there, calling us one way or another, it can be hard to distinguish between what is real and what is false.

I can't help but wonder if that's why Jesus turns to his disciples just at this moment and asks them this question. Caesarea Philippi was a colonial outpost of the Roman empire. It was a city built as a tribute to Caesar by the Tetrarch Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great. While this wasn't the most important Roman city in Judea, it would have been home to many shrines and temples to the various Roman gods and goddesses. And at the center of it was probably the likeness of Caesar himself who had become the object of worship by many.

So as they're entering this bastion of Roman hubris Jesus turns to them perhaps to learn just how well they can distinguish between what's real and what's false. Are they swayed by the promises of Rome? Are they impressed by Caesar's claims? Peter's answer, and he speaks for them all, is, "No." They aren't swayed by what Rome has to offer. They aren't impressed by Caesar's power. When Peter confesses that Jesus is "son of the living God," he also denies that title to Caesar. Simply put, if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. Peter makes that claim right there in the middle of the Empire's church.

Now, Peter may not fully appreciate everything his confession means. And later he will have trouble trusting it. But right now, standing with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, Peter knows. He's found the real thing.

So much of the gospel has to do with where we put our trust. Do we put our trust in wealth and possessions to protect and fulfill us, or do we put our trust in the God who meets us in Jesus and let go of our anxiety and our fear, our constant grasping after things? And when it comes to this confession do we put our trust in it or do we hedge our bets and rely on the promises of society and culture?

What, for instance, is our response when we learn that people in Buffalo who must live in federal housing are living in unhealthy and threatening conditions: roofs with gaping holes from unfinished work; water dripping through light fixtures when it rains; elderly residents huddling in lobbies because they don't safe in their apartments? Do we trust the standards of justice set by society or do we seek something higher? Does our confession of Jesus as messiah, as Lord, add a unique perspective when it comes to advocating for the poorest and weakest among us?

This One we confess is son of the living God who declares to Israel: "Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands will wait for me, and for my arm they hope." If we confess that Christ is God's arm, God's deliverance, then surely we are called to pursue God's justice.

Where do we put our trust? What claims are real and what are false? Our discernment of these things begins with our confession that Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God. We make that confession in our own pantheon of injustice when we speak on behalf of the poor, when we advocate for decent housing or access to healthcare, when we hold governments accountable for torture, when we speak out against abuses of human rights in China or Darfur or Guantanamo Bay. If we've found the real thing in Jesus, the true presence of God, then we can no longer keep silent in a world crying out for justice. Peter makes his confession in the Empire's church and so must we.

Such is the joyful burden of putting our trust in Christ. His concerns become our own. His desire for the wholeness of God's children becomes our own. By confessing Jesus as messiah, and nothing or no one else, we're called away from false lives spent in meaningless pursuits. And in the end we discover that the thing he makes real is us.

Amen