

## ***Son of Man***

Mark 8: 31-38; Romans 4: 13-25

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### **I. Introduction**

When I was growing up, there was a point briefly when I wasn't crazy about my nickname. "Charlie" didn't seem to capture who I thought I was and so I experimented with some other names that frankly never worked and I am where I am, and I'm okay with that now. But names are important. Names capture a piece of who we are and express who we want to be. And we're taking this Lenten time together to look at some of the names that we use around Jesus, and we're following our lectionary text which is a set of readings that the church has laid out for this season. Every week we're looking at one of those expressions that we as a church have used to talk about who Jesus is.

Last week we talked about Jesus as the Son of God and we reflected a little bit on the divinity of Jesus. This week we're exploring this very interesting term, "the Son of man." The late theologian, Walter Wink, says, "The further I penetrate into the mystery of this term, the more profound and provocative it seems. I have struggled with this puzzle long enough to suspect that the real reward lies not in deciphering the riddle but in wrestling with it."

### **II. Coming on Clouds**

So, if the "Son of God" as a term reflects on Jesus' divinity, it is not a bad assumption to make to think that the term "the Son of Man" may be a reflection on Christ's humanity. And in fact, that term as it was used in the Hebrew Scriptures does generally refer to a person's humanity. It's a pretty common term in the Hebrew scriptures, it gets used 108 times and 93 of those are actually in the book of Ezekiel, where all that God calls the Prophet Ezekiel is Son of Man, "Son of Man, what do you see? Son of Man, go to this place." Never uses Ezekiel's name. Never uses Ezekiel's title -- Ezekiel was a priest -- but uses this phrase as a way of emphasizing Ezekiel's createdness -- the difference between who Ezekiel is and who the holiness of God is.

There's a number of other places in the Hebrew Scriptures that use the term "Son of Man" in the same way as an affirmation of our humanity. It often gets translated actually in some of the more modern translations as the Human One or the Human Being.

But there's one exception to this and it's an important one. In the book of Daniel in the seventh chapter, there is a vision that the prophet has where he says he sees one that is like a Son of Man coming down on the clouds, and in Daniel's vision, the Son of Man is an apocalyptic figure. It's this wondrous, semi-divine figure that ushers in the close of the age, and as Janet Craswell said in the children's time, closes out the

story of oppression and injustice and starts the new story, the unending story of God's promised kingdom on earth where justice and compassion reign.

The "Son of Man" as a term gets used that same way in a lot of the literature that was being written around Jesus' time as well. In the book of Ezra, which is not part of our canon of the Hebrew Scriptures but is part of the Roman Catholic Church's canon, the Son of Man appears again as this apocalyptic figure. In the book of Enoch which never made it into the Bible but was written around the same time that Jesus was alive, it's also used to refer to this apocalyptic figure.

And Jesus clearly is using it in this way when he talks about himself. This is interestingly the only phrase, the only title that Jesus uses to apply to himself in his earthly ministry. We know this because it occurs a lot in the Gospels. It's used 87 times in the New Testament as a whole and all but three of those happen in the Gospels and they're almost all from the lips of Jesus. Jesus always refers to himself as the "Son of Man." And you'll remember some of those phrases where he says, "The Son of Man has the power to forgive sins. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." When he is being questioned before the Sanhedrin, Jesus says, "You will see the Son of Man coming on clouds and glory." So, Jesus clearly is not talking about his own humanity. He's actually referring to himself as this figure that's going to bring about the close of the age and usher in the kingdom of God.

### **III. Kingdom Building**

So, if the Son of Man is an apocalyptic figure, then we who are followers of the Son of Man should have our eyes on the kingdom that the Son of Man is going to bring about. The whole purpose of referring to himself as the Son of Man for Jesus is to keep us mindful that God's kingdom of justice and peace is coming and that we as followers are to keep our eye on that prize in the midst of a world that is fraught with injustice and want and brokenness and violence. To talk about Jesus as a Son of Man is to remind ourselves that God has a bigger story for us and to keep focused on that kingdom.

The coming of the kingdom of course is at the heart of Jesus' message but it's not simply a kingdom that is coming down the pike. Jesus' advice to us is not to simply hold on and wait until the kingdom comes. Jesus understands that in his ministry, the kingdom is in-breaking into the world, so that he says to his disciples at one point, "people are going to say, 'Oh, the kingdom is coming,' or 'There's the kingdom,' and Jesus says, "No, the kingdom is in your midst. It is in your heart. It is in the way you interact with one another. It is in the way that you interact with the world around you. That is where the kingdom is coming to fruition." What that means for us then as followers of the Son of Man is that we are to be about kingdom building. We are about working for justice, working for reconciliation, working to care for a broken earth. The kingdom of God is not something we wait for. It's something that we do.

### **IV. Suffering**

But here is the catch. All of that kingdom-building language is wonderfully empowering and hopeful, we're all about building and justice here, and that's good news. What's important to pay attention to in this passage is that as soon as Jesus starts talking about the Son of Man and the kingdom of God, he immediately switches and turns to talking about the Passion, suffering and death. And I love to see Peter's response to this. Peter, of course, has not only been following Jesus' whole ministry but just two verses earlier when Jesus asked, "Who am I?" Peter said, "You are the Messiah. You're the one we've been waiting for." Jesus then starts to talk about the Passion and Peter says, "Hold on a minute. That's not what I meant." And Mark uses a very powerful verb here, he says, "Peter rebukes Jesus." Here is a helpful hint, that's not something you want to do, right? But Peter rebukes Jesus, "This is not what I meant." And Jesus says, "I know, so better you listen." "Get behind me, Satan," he says. Another helpful hint, if Jesus calls you Satan, you should probably change what you're doing, right? Just a word.

So, Jesus is trying to help Peter and the disciples understand that the kingdom doesn't come because we're working hard, because we're fighters for justice. The kingdom comes because we engage in acts of self-sacrifice and participate in suffering. We place ourselves in the area where suffering resides. We offer ourselves in sacrificial giving to bring about the kingdom. And Mark is very clear that the disciples didn't want to hear that. In the next couple of chapters, Jesus talks about the Passion three different times and every single time, the disciples pushed back.

This first time when Jesus mentions it, Peter rebukes him. The next time Jesus mentions the Passion, Mark says that the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask, and they immediately started talking about who was greater. What an interesting defensive reaction. The third time that Jesus mentions the Passion, Mark says they were amazed and afraid, and immediately James and John come to Jesus and start asking him can they sit on his right and left hand when he comes in glory. We love the pictures of Jesus coming in glory. And over and over again, Jesus says, "The way the kingdom comes is through our sacrifice and our willingness to be in a place of suffering."

Jesus' disciples then and now don't want to hear about sacrifice and suffering, amen? Tell me about a prosperity Gospel where God wants me to be rich and successful and good-looking. That's not funny. That's the kind of Gospel I could get my hands around. I like that. A Gospel that requires that I sacrifice, that I place myself where suffering is, I'm less excited about that. And yet, over and over again, Jesus says, "This is how the kingdom comes." This is why, dear friends, when I'm talking to you about stewardship, I talk to you about sacrificial giving. It's not a fundraising technique entirely. It's about the fact that when we give in a sacrificial way, we become instruments of the kingdom's in-breaking. When we give of our time and our talents in a sacrificial way, that's when we become part of the kingdom's in-breaking. It's when we are willing to suffer and to be where suffering is in a society that tries desperately to avoid suffering in any way that we can, that's when the kingdom starts

to break in. Jesus is clear that the kingdom is brought forth through suffering and sacrifice, his first, and then ours.

## **V. Truly Human**

And while we don't want to hear that any more than Peter did, the good news is that the one who chose to suffer and sacrifice himself, the one who paid the entire price, is also the one that God glorifies in the Son of Man and uses to usher in the new kingdom of love and justice. Because God chooses to become human, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has shown us what it really means to be human, that we are all called to be like Jesus.

We talked last week that Jesus is the first born of many siblings and that all of us through the power of the resurrection are invited to be like he was. Imagine what that looks like for you. What does it look like to live a life where you're acting decisively out of who you are, what's it look like to live a life that is free from fear, where we don't have to walk around avoiding suffering and avoiding pain and being careful, but where we can be all of who God has created us to be, where we could create a world in which justice reigns and which people are fed and housed, in which we love one another regardless of race and culture. We get to be those sort of people, the people that create that world.

And we don't get there because we work harder and we're more talented and we pour all of ourselves into it. We do it because God has made it possible and all that God requires of us is believing that it's possible. This is what Romans is trying to say. Abraham didn't get chosen because he was better than anybody else or he was working harder than anyone else. Abraham got chosen because God says, "Here is the promise," and Abraham believed it. That's all he did. He believed it and it was counted to him as righteousness. God has promised us that we are to be like Jesus and all we get to worry about is believing that promise, to release the power of the resurrection into our lives so that we start becoming who Jesus shows us we can be.

## **VI. Conclusion**

So, I'm going to end with the Walter Wink quote that I started with because I really like it, "The farther I penetrate into the mystery of this term," the Son of Man, "the more profound and provocative it seems. I have struggled with this puzzle long enough to suspect that the real reward lies not in deciphering the riddle but wrestling with it." So, as we continue on our Lenten journey, I want to invite you to continue the wrestling process. What does it mean to follow the Son of Man? What does it mean to live out of a promise that we can be like Jesus and be tools for God to use to usher in the great and glorious kingdom?

Amen.