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“Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:14).

## **Twenty-First Sunday of the Year**

*Isa 22:19-23; Ps 138; Rom 11:33-36; Matt 16:13-20*

Location! Location! The real estate mantra also applies to significant moments in the Bible. A little knowledge of history and geography makes today's Gospel reading light up. Just as Jesus chose his hometown to inaugurate his ministry, so he chose a specific location to declare his identity and intent -- the region of Caesarea Philippi.

It was here that Herod had built a temple to ingratiate himself with Caesar, then handed it on to his son Philip, who enhanced the Greco-Roman location, which was also the site of a cave believed to be the gate to the netherworld and a locus of evil by Jews.

By choosing this site to poll his disciples about who he was before they began their trek south to Jerusalem, Jesus was declaring that his mission was in direct contrast to imperial claims to divine approbation. Furthermore, his Kingdom would defeat evil not by force but by self-emptying love on a Roman cross. The campaign he was launching would defeat sin and death, and not even the gates of hell could stop God's transforming mercy.

The moment had come to test whether his disciples understood the enormity of what lay ahead. It would be a no-holds-barred confrontation between good and evil, heaven coming to earth to overturn earthly pretenders to absolute control of human destiny. Even Satan, who once vowed to return after his attempt to seduce Jesus in the desert, was being alerted in this place that Jesus was coming to dethrone him, not as King Messiah but as the Suffering Servant of God.

When Jesus asks them who they think he is, Simon is inspired to call him the Christ. To prepare him to lead the others, Jesus changes his name to Peter. No faltering “Simon,” a reed, would do. Simon would have to be the rock, “Peter,” on which they could depend when apparent defeat overwhelmed them. Peter could never have foreseen that his own denial and defeat would be part of his preparation to lead a church based on forgiveness and absolute mercy. Like the rock in the desert Moses struck to find water, Peter would be broken to release the flood of tears that would baptize all the Apostles for their ministry.

The temptation to hyperbole by calling a conflict the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, order over chaos, is predictable and sometimes applicable. Wanton destruction of human life is one measure of evil and the defeat of tyranny is a measure of good. Both these are on a grand scale. Yet, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reminded us that "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts." This makes everyone responsible to be a moral compass for the whole world.

Jesus chose a place that represented evil to school his disciples to trust that goodness, truth and love will always defeat the forces of sin and death. He was on his way to demonstrate God's plan for human destiny, and he asked them to follow him. He invites us to do the same, to be agents of reconciliation and ambassadors of peace. Then people will know who he is, but also who we are.

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