Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:27).

Gn 9:1-13; *Mk 8:27-33*

Many dramatic plays divide the production with an intermission. The first part of the play introduces the characters and the plot, building up the tension and the questions introduced by the story. During the intermission, the audience retreats to the lobby to discuss the action and speculate how the play will resolve itself.

Exactly halfway thought his Gospel, Mark brings his audience to the central question Jesus poses: “Who do you say that I am?” In a shocking scene near the city of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus not only tests their understanding of who he is, he reveals that most of their expectation of success and glory in Jerusalem are totally wrong. He is going to be rejected and executed. Peter, who has just identified him as the Messiah, is so upset that he scolds Jesus, only to be reprimanded severely.

Intermission.

A stunned audience leaves the theater to fathom the meaning of this reversal. The central faith question is pressed in on each of them. “Who do you think Jesus is?” Where will you stand when he is rejected and killed? It is a crucial exercise, for the purpose of the Gospel is to challenge our faith. The rest of the play will make sense only to those who are open to the mystery of Jesus’s self-sacrificing love.

The Gospel must overtake us in the most personal terms possible for it to have its full impact. It is not a story about other people, about disciples who lived 2,000 years ago. The Gospel is about us. Jesus deliberately looks directly at us during the dialogue at Caesarea Philippi. The question is not, who do other people say that I am? But who do *you* say that I am? As we let this question focus our minds and hearts, we realize that everything else depends on how we answer it.

In our liturgical and personal encounter with the Scriptures, we will begin the time of Lent next week. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving will sharpen the question in us. Who is this Jesus we claim to be joined to by our baptism and membership in the church? How will his suffering, death and resurrection be decisive for us? The drama resumes now in earnest. The sobering challenge of faith must break open our hearts to know not just who Jesus is, but who *we* really are.