

Who Do We Say He Is? – Mark 8:27-38

Rev. Matt Nieman

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So, what do you know about artificial intelligence, or AI? Maybe because I was thinking of it this week, I noticed story after story about artificial intelligence and how it's impacting the world.

I know very little about it. I've been told it can be (and has been) very good for us as a society. And I'm told that it can have very negative effects on society as well.

Chat GPT is one form of AI that has wide-ranging implications for writing. You can simply instruct, for example, Chat GPT to write, say, a sermon on a certain topic. And it will actually come up with a sermon that comes somewhat close to being indistinguishable from one written by a real-life preacher. (The answer, by the way, is NEVER. Never have, never will.)

Chat GPT can even write its own jokes for you. You could say, "Tell me jokes about two old guys." And it would quickly write a story like this: Two old men were discussing their ailments. The first man said, "I'm getting forgetful. I can't even remember my old phone number." The second man replied, "I hear you. Last week, I forgot my own birthday." The first man said, "That's not so bad." The second man responded, "You're right. It was my wife's birthday."

There are other, more serious dangers with artificial intelligence, too. And one of those dangers is how images of real-life events or humans can be altered in ways that they are also indistinguishable from real events or humans.

AI can impersonate somebody, and that could lead to breaches of trust and other manipulations that put people at risk. The presence of AI tools such as this mandate that we make sure who we're dealing with. Who's writing what we see on the screen? Who really is that person we're seeing on the screen?

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?", he in effect was gauging people's level of knowledge as to his authenticity. Many were not at all clear as to who he was (John the Baptist, Elijah, another prophet). But then Jesus pressed them even further: "Who do *you* say I am?" And that's when Peter confessed: "You are the Messiah."

The disciples were exposed to Jesus in the flesh. There was no chance he was an AI-generated image. His person was real. But his identity was still very much up in the air to them. Peter comes as close as any of them in nailing it. "You are the Messiah."

Still, though, Jesus does something in response to Peter's confession that leads us to believe he wasn't completely confident that Peter knew him authentically.

He orders Peter not to tell anybody about him. Now, there are multiple accounts throughout the gospels of Jesus telling those around him not to tell others who he is or what they've just seen him do. And we always wonder why Jesus did this. Why wouldn't he want them to tell others about him?

Emerson B. Powery clarifies the tense moment this way: "For Peter and most Jews, 'Messiah' (Christos) refers to a militaristic, political figure who would overthrow Rome's power and establish a new Davidic kingdom, which itself would inaugurate the kingdom of God. Such a divinely authorized

figure could not be the one who ... would 'suffer many things ... and be killed.'"

For that's what Jesus would then go on to teach Peter and the others, that he would undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed.

And to show how difficult it was for even Peter, who proclaimed Jesus Messiah, to comprehend this, he protested and rebuked Jesus.

Jesus was not the Messiah Peter thought of him as. As bold and insightful as Peter had been, he still didn't see Jesus as his authentic self.

Jesus, authentically, isn't like that Messiah who comes in hot, so to speak. He doesn't burst onto the scene with military power to take down the enemies of the world in an instant, the forces that bring so much pain and oppression to the world. Not that we don't wish for that many times. We wish Jesus would act and strike down with great power all those who bring such suffering.

Instead, Jesus acts differently. He plays a role that almost changes the definition of Messiah. He's one of grace, presence, healing, and sacrifice.

Who do we say Jesus is? If you had to ascribe a title or two or three to him, which words would you choose?

It probably depends on the day, the moment, the season of our lives.

When I was a kid, I would probably have described Jesus most predominantly as a teacher—the one who taught me about loving neighbor, giving to the stranger, and speaking truthfully. When I was a teenager and was thinking about what I believed, I was asked to consider Jesus primarily as Lord and Savior (as opposed to all the other influences that purported to save me).

Into adulthood, I then thought of Jesus in other ways: He is the bringer of justice, he is a good shepherd — guiding us. Two or three years ago, amid a personal season of struggle, I viewed Jesus as light amid great darkness. Not one who causes darkness but one who leads us out of darkness or sits with us in our own darkness until he leads us to the light.

Jesus is distinctly authentic, distinctly real, in varying ways in various seasons.

Who do you say he is today?

This past week, I was in South Dakota.

After two plane rides and three-hour drive, I was with my mom in Sioux Falls, where she was suffering from some health issues. Thankfully, she's doing better in her recovery.

I spent a little over three days with her at Sanford Regional Medical Center in Sioux Falls. And Jesus, the Messiah, was present there, even in Sioux Falls 😊 — as a caregiver, healer, and compassionate helper.

You know, Tennesseans are incredibly kind and compassionate people. That was apparent from the time I first set foot here a decade ago. But, upper Midwesterners will not be outdone in that category. We all talk alike, whether we are Iowans, Minnesotans, Nebraskans, or South Dakotans. That unique accent belies a willingness to come alongside and be helpers.

And at that hospital, that staff of doctors, nurses, and others truly were the hands and feet of the Messiah. They skillfully did their work, but with a smile and warmth that is truly remarkable. Even my brother, who's lived in the Midwest his whole life, noted

the friendliness and compassion that stood out while we were in that town of Sioux Falls. And it was heartening.

The blessed thing about Jesus is that he is all this to us—in some seasons more one identity than others. Yet, at all times, he is constant.

That is, if we recognize him. One of our biggest faults as people of faith is recognizing and acknowledging the presence of Jesus as Messiah as we live each day.

There is an old rabbinic story of Rabbi Joshua, walking along the street one day when he suddenly met Elijah. Stunned, but seizing the moment, he buttonholed Elijah with the obvious question: "When is the Messiah coming?" Elijah responded quickly: "Why are you asking me? The Messiah this day is at the gate of the city. Go ask him."

So Rabbi Joshua did as Elijah had told him. And sure enough there at the gates of the city was the Messiah healing the sick, bandaging the wounded, loving the children.

"Master, when are you coming? We have been waiting so long." The Messiah replied: "Today, my son, I am coming."

Rabbi Joshua ran into town and proclaimed at the top of his lungs, "The Messiah is coming. The Messiah is coming." But at the end of the day, the Messiah had not appeared. Everyone ridiculed Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Joshua never made that mistake again.

One day, many years later, the rabbi stumbled upon the prophet Elijah once again. "You misled me, Elijah," the rabbi cried out. "You said the Messiah was here. But he never came."

Elijah said, "You are a rabbi. Surely you ought to know that the Messiah comes only when we hearken to the voice of God." (From, The Babylonia Talmud. Tractate Sanhedrin, 98a.)

When we hearken to the voice of God. When we are looking for Jesus and when we see Jesus as who he intends to be. That's when we recognize him authentically, the authentic Messiah.

Artificial intelligence, or AI, will be a blessing to us and a great challenge and even a threat to us. That's because we will always be challenged to know what it is and who it is we are dealing with. What or who is authentic?

Jesus: Savior, Lord, Friend, Shepherd, Rescuer, Judge, healer, comforter, Light. This is the authentic Messiah, if we see him.