

Sunday Sermon August 23, 2026

I consulted AI and learned that Jesus asked 307 questions in the four Gospels. 307 People were always coming to Jesus looking for answers, and He seemed to constantly be asking questions...

In today's Gospel, He asked two of the most important ones: "Who do people say that I am?" and then "who do you say that I am?" That one's really important.

He asks the question in Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was a Roman town in northern Israel right on the boarder with Syria. Jesus and his disciples were in the borderlands, traveling along the edges, far from home, far from the familiar, far from synagogue and temple. Walking among Gentiles and foreigners.

They were in a place of many religions. Historians tell us that there were 14 temples dedicated to pagan gods. Herod the Great had built a large temple for the Romans to be able to worship Caesar. A temple dedicated to worshipping a man, the Emperor, who claimed to be the son of God. Can you taste the irony here? Jesus, the true Son of God, standing in a place where there is a temple dedicated to an Emperor who claimed to be the son of God...

Who do people say that I am? If that guy claims to be God's son...

Just outside the city there is a huge rock cliff. The face of the cliff was filled with little carved niches for the statues of Greek and Roman gods that could be called upon to support the Emperor who rules through domination, violence, force and fear.

Among them stands Jesus -the true and living God who rules with compassion, mercy and love. The contrast could not be more striking or profound: Earth and heaven.

Beneath the cliff is a cavern filled with water. Greeks considered this the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature. So Caesarea Philippi was a sacred place for pagans, Romans and Greeks. It was a place for Emperor worship. It was a crossroads of religions, commerce and culture. A place where there would have been many different ideas about God.

I can imagine the people in such a place asking questions. Questions like: is the Emperor a god? Are these trees and mountains gods? What about the god of this temple or that?

In the midst of all of this, Jesus asks the questions: Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?

Jesus has been busy. Since healing the Canaanite woman's daughter last week, Jesus has cured many people.

He's fed 4,000 men plus woman and children with enough left over for lunch. He's argued with religious authorities who are demanding signs to try to figure out who He is.

In the midst of all of that, Jesus has discovered that even his own disciples do not understand who He is or what his mission is all about. They think He's just about the bread.

So there they are, standing in a place filled with so many gods, having reached out to people who might now be seeing him as a miracle worker, or a meal ticket, or even a threat. Jesus asks the question: who do people say that I am? What's the word on the street?

And the disciples pipe right up and name the great religious figures of the past: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the other prophets. Jesus does not affirm or deny any of their answers, He simple listens as they tell what they heard from others. What they might believe based on other people's ideas.

And that's what happens for many of us, isn't it? If you grew up in a family that talked about God, you learned from parents or grandparents. If you went to church, religious school or Sunday School, or church camp, you heard other peoples' ideas about God. You learned about God from them. You heard their ideas and experiences, whether well-informed or ill-informed, whether positive or negative.

I've been thinking a lot about my family and growing up, and the more I do, the more grateful I am for having grown up in a family that went to church and talked about God at home. I learned about God, and experienced the wonder and mystery of liturgy from the time I was a little boy.

But if you were to ask 10 or 11 year old Billy about God, you would likely have heard him describe someone who was a combination of a policeman and Santa Clause. God was to be feared. God was waiting for me to break the rules so He could get me. God would punish me if I was naughty and reward me if I was nice.

That worked for my child self. I was a pretty good boy – I had very little detention and no jail time. But I needed to grow beyond those ideas that others had given me and come to know the living God.

That's why Jesus' second question is so important. It draws us beyond what others have said, what we have been taught, ideas (whether positive or negative) and pushes us to reflect on relationship.

Who do you say that I am? How am I alive and active for you, today, at this moment, in the midst of whatever you might be going through?

Peter nails it: "You are the Son of the living God." The Son: God in the flesh, beloved child, of the living God. Living. Not a vestige of the past. Not an idea or intellectual abstraction. Not a king on a throne in a far-distant heaven. Not a policeman or Santa Clause.

Jesus is the Son of the living God, alive and active here and now, in God's unconditional love for us and our love for each other. Living – He offers us new and abundant life here and now as we await the gift of eternal life with God and those who have gone before us in the life to come.

Peter nails the answer, but I don't know how much of it he understood, which makes him a lot like the rest of us. At least that's what our friend Brian McLaren suggests when he writes:

"In many ways, we're all like Peter. We speak with great insight one minute and we make complete fools of ourselves the next. We're clueless about how many of our pious and popular assumptions are actually illusions. We don't know how little we know, and we have no idea how many of our ideas are wrong. Like Peter, we may use the right words to describe Jesus- *Christ, Son of the living God*. But we still don't understand Jesus' heart, his wisdom, his way. But that's OK. Peter

was still learning, and so are we. After all, life with Jesus is one big field trip that we're taking together. So let's keep walking." Let's keep walking. That's faith.

"Let's keep walking" because understanding Jesus' heart, his wisdom, his Way, takes a lifetime. A lifetime of walking in His footsteps, growing in knowledge and love, practicing compassion, understanding and generosity, coming to know and to love the Son of the Living God.

Who asks each of us the question: who do you say that I am?

Amen