

*“What Does the Messiah Do?”*

Every once and a while, someone has the unexpected experience of starting a new job and soon discovering it entails something far different than what was in the Job Description. I would imagine that would be a very great disappointment, especially when a person joyfully accepted the job based on the reasonable assumption the responsibilities described in the Job Description were accurate. If we were to travel back a couple of thousand years, then we would find folks full of assumptions about the tasks they were expected to fulfill in their jobs. There were no written Job Descriptions.

**When someone became a student or disciple of a religious leader, there were also assumptions about both the benefits and the costs of discipleship.** As Jesus called his original disciples, they each had their own expectations of how their jobs and lives would be changed. There was no long negotiation interview and no signed contract. Oh, yes, there were a few vague statements – perhaps promises. Remember, Jesus told Simon and his brother, Andrew, in **Mark 1:17**, *“Come with me, and I will teach you to catch men.”* Of course, Jesus tailored that invitation to those two fishermen brothers. However, he did not really specify the costs and the benefits of their being his disciples.

Although the twelve original disciples of Jesus were not necessarily highly educated, they were very aware of the benefits enjoyed and exercised by the religious followers of different Rabbis or Teachers. For example, the party of the Pharisees, who followed the Teachers of the Law, were afforded great respect and influence in Jewish society. Unfortunately, some of the Pharisees frequently overdid the exercise of their authority. The New Testament Gospels reveal Jesus’ disciples admired the Pharisees and other religious authorities and, at times, were tempted to follow their argumentative and judgmental examples – including fighting over who should be Jesus’ top disciples.

In our Scripture Reading, Jesus’ disciples had been with him for a significant amount of time. They had witnessed his miracles, heard his teachings, and observed the way Jesus had related to the different segments of the larger society. It was a good time to take stock – to evaluate how the people were responding to Jesus and his public ministry. So, he asked his disciples in **verse 27**, *“Tell me, who do people say I am?”* Since there were no polling companies, Jesus depended on what his disciples had heard from the crowds to gauge how the people were responding to him. The original disciples were, evidently, not reporting much to Jesus on their own initiative.

**In verse 28 Mark wrote, “Some say that you are John the Baptist, they answered; others say that you are Elijah, while others say that you are one of the prophets.”** Perhaps, Jesus was disappointed by their report. Did the report of his disciples indicate to Jesus the crowds understood the meaning of his message and ministry? It doesn’t seem it did because Jesus went on to ask them in **verse 29**, *“What about you? Who do you say I am?”* Since, Jesus’ true identity was not recognized by the general population, did he decide to find out the depth of understanding of who he really was by his disciples?

Impetuous *“Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah.’”* Strangely enough, Jesus’ investigation into how well people recognized his identity was concluded with Mark writing in **verse 30**, *“Then Jesus ordered them, ‘Do not tell anyone about me.’”* Perhaps, he did not want his disciples’ belief about his ultimate identity to influence the natural and eventual recognition of the populace. Maybe this was just another example of Jesus ordering the keeping of the Messianic Secret, as frequently reported in Mark. Or, was Jesus trying to delay his public confrontation over his identity with the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, and the Chief Priests until his disciples better understood his messianic identity and purpose and a significant portion of the people truly recognized him?

According to Mark, Jesus immediately launched into teaching his disciples about the meaning of him being the Messiah. One might expect this to be the next logical step in the development of the original disciples of Jesus. It was at this stage, when the expectations and assumptions of the disciples about the joys and costs of discipleship and the True Meaning of Jesus being the Messiah collided! The Scripture stated in **verses 31 and 32a**, *“Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: ‘The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life.’ He made this very clear to them.”*

The response of the disciples to this collision of their expectations and desires with reality was swift and quite remarkable! Simon Peter was the oldest of the 12 original disciples of Jesus and he often put his foot in his mouth.

The Gospel of Matthew is friendlier toward Peter because it reported Jesus heaping high praise on the elder disciple and promising him special authority after Peter's declaration of Jesus being the Messiah. However, our Reading from Mark omits that praise of Peter and moves directly to revealing in **verse 32b**, ***“So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”*** Peter quickly challenged Jesus' definition of what the Messiah does! Evidently, Peter like most of the then Jewish Society, expected the Messiah to become the Warrior King, who would defeat the Roman Empire and usher in the Kingdom of God on the earth. Peter and the rest of the original disciples must have been holding their breath, as they waited for Jesus to announce he was King and going to war against Rome.

Instead, Jesus had just revealed he would suffer and die because of the Jewish Religious Establishment! He also told them he would rise back to life but they were evidently in such shock they simply tuned out that part of Jesus' declaration of what he would do as the Messiah. So, Jesus' definition of his calling, as the Messiah, was in stark contrast with that of Peter, the rest of the original disciples, and the vast majority of the Jews. Who was correct? Peter and those holding his expectations or Jesus? Mark tells us in **verse 33**, ***“But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter.”*** Jesus needed to know whether or not the rest of his disciples witnessed what Peter had done. Seeing they had been watching, Jesus continued, ***“Get away from me, Satan,’ he said. ‘Your thoughts don’t come from God but from human nature!’”***

Not only did Peter and the other original disciples get a big shock with that revelation but it also meant following Jesus' example would not be pleasant – it would not come with pomp, prestige, wealth, and privilege. So, disciples of Jesus the Christ or the Messiah should not have their focus on some prosperity gospel – on always winning and profiting greatly! Instead, Mark reported in **verses 34-38**, ***“Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. ‘If any of you want to come with me,’ he told them, ‘you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! There is nothing you can give to regain your life. If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’”***

God sent the Only Son of God, Jesus the Christ, to be the ultimate embodiment of God's Agape Self-Giving and Suffering Love for us – just as the quote from Isaiah, which we used for Today's Call To Worship, spoke of God's Devoted Servant. The Messiah was sent to bring us the Good News of our Forgiveness, of God's Invitation to live with God in a New Relationship, and to be Reconciled both with God and all people. This Agape Sacrificial Love of God is the power which enables us to be Transformed – Made into New Creatures in Christ. As we follow Jesus' example of Living Agape Love, we to sacrifice and deny our personal desires to prosper at the expense of others.

**The meaning of Jesus' call for his disciples, including us, is for us to live out that same agape love in our daily lives! As Jesus said, “you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it.”** The way of the world – the popular view of Christianity is one should become a Christian to prosper oneself – get into heaven after one dies. Unfortunately, many who think of themselves as Christians – followers or disciples of Jesus, have bought into the cultural definition of Christianity, instead of the agape loving life Jesus calls forth from us in those words he shared with his original disciples and the crowd after informing the disciples he would suffer, die, and be raised in the fulfillment of his call to be God's Messiah.

**Jesus Christ is God's Son, the Messiah, the Suffering Servant of God, and the embodiment of God's Agape Love for all people – all Creation. Will we follow our true Messiah and live that same agape love? Amen.**