

## “Holy Ground Walking”

Reading: Matthew 16:13-27; John 8:42-59

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

How do you know what is real? The other night I was sitting at my computer and my dog was snoozing on the floor behind me, and he had one of those dreams where he started twitching and yipping; he was probably stressed about all the chipmunks in the backyard. You and I know a dream from reality, but was that real to him? When he woke up, did he think he had really just been chasing chipmunks? How do you *know* that a dream is not real? How do you *know* that what you’re seeing and hearing and feeling right now isn’t all in your head? How do you *know* that you’re not actually a highly advanced computer simulation of a human, like in *The Matrix*? How do you know that anything outside of yourself isn’t actually a very realistic delusion? Maybe you’re really in a hospital bed right now, having a very vivid hallucination. If so, I’m sort of glad that you’re hallucinating church.

There are entire branches of philosophy and neuroscience and physics devoted to understanding what reality is. Reality is not the simple, straightforward thing we take it for. Quantum physics and other, even more advanced branches of science have helped us realize that reality is far more complicated than we thought. René Descartes famously postulated, “I think, therefore I am,” because we’ve got to start somewhere, and questioning the very nature of reality can leave you unsure of everything. At least I can be sure that *I* am thinking, and therefore I must exist. But why does thinking imply existence? Lots of things exist without thinking, presumably, so the two are not necessarily connected. And even if your thinking means that you exist, how do you know that anything *but* you exists? Maybe the entire universe exists only in your head. For all our sakes, then, please do not fall asleep during my sermon.

How do you *know* what you know? How do you know what is real? And what do you do (or would you do) if you were faced with something from outside your reality, something that fundamentally challenged your notion of what reality is? How would you come to terms with that? Small-minded people might simply deny it, reject it, attack it, even. Deep people might get excited and think, “Ah! Reality is bigger than I thought!”

In our chapter of *The Story* for this week, Jesus is encountering people who are facing just this situation, and they must decide what they will do when reality changes around them. These are folks who have a pretty solid grasp on the world, they think, and Jesus simply is not fitting into that reality. The question they faced, and that people faced every time they encountered Jesus, and that we face today when we encounter Jesus, is how we will respond to having our reality challenged by the presence of Jesus. This man Jesus is the focal point of this entire ages-long story of God’s work in creation, but He’s not the focal point they thought He would be, and He doesn’t focus them like they thought He would.

He’s confronted by the elite religious scholars, the people who make it their job to know the things of God, and they argue with Him over where He comes from. Really what it comes down to is posturing; they want to show off their religious pedigree and they can’t handle someone else claiming to have a better knowledge of God than them. “Abraham is our father!” they insist. “We’re directly in the line of God’s work in history.” And when Jesus isn’t convinced, they say, “The only Father we have is God Himself!” Jesus says no, you are Satan’s children, because you are actively fighting the work of

God's kingdom. And then He makes the fateful statement: "Before Abraham was born, I am!" And they wanted to stone Him to death.

You see, in their reality, anyone claiming to be God was committing the heinous sin of blasphemy. Jesus never came out and said that He was God in so many words, but here in this statement He comes pretty close. "I Am" is the name God gave for Himself way back in our story when Moses stood on holy ground before the bush that was blazing with the presence of God Himself, and God gave Him a mission to set God's people free from slavery. When Moses asked Him in whose name he was being sent, God identified Himself as "I Am Who I Am." He is the one who exists, whose existence is the very definition of existence. When questioned about His identity, then, Jesus responds with some improper, yet accurate, grammar: He does not say, "Before Abraham was born, I was," past tense, because His point is not that He is really old, He says, "Before Abraham, I AM," present tense. He is claiming for Himself the same definitive existence claimed by God to Moses.

Jesus' opponents see this as blasphemy, and if anyone else had said it, it would have been. Their reality had room for a God who was present, who revealed Himself in unapproachable glory, who came riding on the clouds and made the mountains melt before Him. Their reality did not have room for the Son of God arriving as the Son of Man, one who shed His glory and cloaked Himself in humility, one who convicted the self-righteous but dined with sinners. They could understand God coming down and making holy ground; they could not handle the holy ground walking among them. The calculus of their religious understanding could not compute such a God. But there He was, a reality that made no sense to them, intruding on their own understanding of what is real. And they had to choose how to respond.

Jesus was walking along with His disciples one day and asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They gave Him several answers, ways that people had managed to fit this enigma of Jesus into their existing reality. He was obviously someone great, so perhaps He was Jeremiah or Elijah or another of the prophets. Jesus asks them, "Who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." He gets it right! Jesus commends him, because he has been sensitive enough to the movement of God that he has grasped something of critical importance: he has been perceptive enough to accept a revelation of the kingdom. Jesus tells him that "this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood," that is, your normal logic and senses didn't deduce this based on what you already know, this is a revelation that you have received from God.

But then Jesus begins to explain to them what it means that He is the Messiah: He must suffer at the hands of those in power, He must be killed, and on the third day, He will rise again. And Peter steps out of his place as a follower of Jesus and rebukes Jesus for saying such things. The Messiah cannot allow such things to happen to Him, because that's not how we understand the Messiah to act. And Peter, who has just been commended as the foundation rock of Jesus' church, is now taking the place of Satan, the accuser, the tempter, luring Jesus away from the path of the cross.

Those religious elites who filled the role of sons of Satan did so by seeing the revelation that God Himself was standing right in front of them, but they rejected that revelation because it didn't fit what they "knew" was real. Peter filled the role of Satan himself by seeing the revelation that God's

Messiah was going to save through suffering and self-sacrifice, and then rejecting that revelation because it didn't fit with what he "knew" about how people were saved.

And so we see this wonderful and important truth about God's kingdom, that the reality of that kingdom and much of its character can only be revealed to us. It can't be deduced or computed or reasoned, because God's kingdom must break into our reality from outside and we've lost the eyes to see it on our own. We can't learn about God's kingdom on our own; God has to teach it to us. There are certain things about God that cannot make sense to us; they must simply be shown to us and then we accept them or reject them, and with them, Him. In Christ we begin to see a new reality that our eyes are unaccustomed to. We see things about who God is and how God works that we never would have guessed, and we learn what it means to be saved in ways that we didn't even know we needed to be saved before they were shown to us.

This remarkable Son of Man who is the Son of God, Jesus, reveals things to us about where our story came from and where it is going and what it is about that we could not have foreseen. And when things are revealed to us, we have that same choice every time: accept it and change our understanding of reality to make room for it, or reject it and try to force it to fit into our smaller notions of reality. He shows us that there is a kingdom that is present, arriving, *here*. It runs right alongside our current reality, right in the middle of everything else we're doing, and then suddenly it pops us and reminds us that God is at work. In our chapter of *The Story* this week we read of the Transfiguration of Jesus, when His kingdom suddenly bleeds through and He is glimpsed in glory, and then things are back to normal. When Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus entrusts him with the keys of the kingdom, saying that when we forgive sins on earth they will have been forgiven in heaven, in a mystical mix-up of verb tenses showing us that God's actions and our actions are sometimes bound up in one another.

He shows us that the actions of that kingdom are fundamentally different than the actions of other kingdoms. The king of this kingdom does not glorify Himself, but rather, He humbles Himself even to the point of death for others. He builds His kingdom not by calling others to take up instruments of power and fighting for Him, but by calling others to take up their crosses, to walk the path that He walked, to deny their own notions of power and success and meaning, to trust in God fully, and to find their lives by losing them. He shows us that suffering in this kingdom need not be meaningless, that evil does not win even when it kills us, that power is not found in strength but in love, that the most wretched and wicked sinners in the world are still God's beloved, and that even enemies can be overcome by love. This is a kingdom that does not compute in the reality of our world. It can only be revealed and accepted.

This is one of the reasons that I love the Wesleyan tradition so much, because we so strongly affirm that God is one who comes to us in love to reveal Himself to us. In Christ, God lovingly approaches us to show us what we could not see on our own. He calls to those of us who are obsessed with our own little kingdoms — whether we're like the Pharisees, looking to keep what we've got, or like Peter, looking to fight for what we don't have — He calls us away from those little kingdoms that will not last and do not matter, and invites us to become heirs of His eternal kingdom. We cannot find this kingdom on our own; it must be shown to us. And our eyes are only opened to it as we walk in communion with Christ. Take up your cross. Deny yourself. Follow Him.



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