

Last week we saw Jesus travel to a specific place for very intentional reasons and he does so again today. He chooses Caesarea Philippi as the backdrop to his question about who he is. Caesarea Philippi was the home for the pagan god of Baal. There was also a huge temple to the godhead of Caesar. It was the birthplace of the nature god, Pan, along with a number of others. It was like Jesus was saying, "How do I compare in the midst of all of this?" when he ask about "Who do they say I am?"

Not that he was having a crisis of identity wanting to know who he was! Nor was he some type of politician asking about how he was doing in the polls or like some actor/actress concerning the critic's reviews of their performance.

No, Jesus was setting up his disciples, wanting to discover what they thought of him as opposed to the conventional wisdom of the time. There were many confusing answers concerning who Jesus was. He might ask the same question today and the answers may not be that encouraging: "*Well, Jesus, often there is nothing anyone is saying. Hollywood no longer even refers to you nor does the public sphere. It seems, you may be not even spoke of much anymore* (except with the Cathedral parishioners!).

And so he offers a more specific question, which could apply to all of us and in every generation of people: "Who do *you* say that I am?" Our backdrop might be a bit different from the time of Jesus, but the choice would still be as stark: He might be standing in front of Short Pump mall, asking where he ranked? Or in front of a bank or a place involving wealth; perhaps standing in front of the place you work, wondering of his importance when stacked next to this. He might even find himself standing along the side lines of some sporting event (for the kids) on Sunday morning, wondering what might be our preference: Him or the church?

Peter gets the right answer – "You are the Christ!" And Jesus might have been like any professor, "Finally, they are getting it!" But then Peter fails to understand what that means. Jesus' reaction is rather harsh: "Get behind me Satan..."

Why such a reaction? It is really based in love, as he is trying to protect Peter and all of us, for that matter. In so doing, he was in effect, saying, "Peter, things will get very rough in the days ahead, as I will suffer greatly and your faith will be shaken. You, too, will have to suffer because of me. Peter, many people leave me when things start to go wrong in their lives. They will blame me, forgetting that I never said to follow me would be free of suffering. I just want you to be ready."

It would be like any parent, warning their child the ways of the world. They are not going to tell them that all will be well and that they can trust anyone. No, they have to be very harsh in order to protect them. This what Jesus is doing with Peter.

There may be times, though, in the midst of these trials that we will forget what Jesus looks like. At the end of our Gospel reading, he tells us that if this occurs, look to the self and die to the self. Spend time for him or the other and then we will begin to see Jesus. If we rely only on ourselves, we will lose life and faith. Spend your life, die to your life and you will find Jesus.

Today I have invited someone to come and speak to us. Jim literally almost died, but in the dying, he truly found life.

My Testimony  
By James Fenerty

Hello: My name is James Fenerty, and I have a story of my experience with the Lord, and its "profound" effects on my life. Miracle upon miracle that have occurred in my life since, and expert doctor after doctor have been bewildered and dumbfounded at results they have said were unbelievable.

Firstly, I was brought up Roman Catholic and confirmed in 8th grade back in the late 1970's. I attended church with my family as a kid but after confirmation it would be my choice, and I continued for awhile but drifted away, except on holidays. I attended University of Maryland and received a BA degree in Economics in May of 1985. I moved to Boston, MA to continue living with a girlfriend (my life before Christ), and pursue a career. I loved the city, and being Irish Catholic I felt very much at home.

I started playing guitar in high school and was only an average player who could only sing for my own delight. However, suddenly in Boston I started singing and playing guitar really well. I began receiving attention from my newfound "talent" that I was unprepared for.

I got a job selling cars in Brockton MA and was outselling the best salesman on the team. They told me I was going to make \$150,000 or more if I kept up anything like my pace. So my life was fantastic!

Then, the night before Thanksgiving, I was driving home from work to pick up my girlfriend and drive us both home to Westport, CT where we grew up. But I never made it back to our apartment in Boston. I was hit by a drunk driver who was driving a stolen car. I was put into an extremely deep coma, very close to being "brain dead", and doctors were giving my parents dire prognosis.

My parents alerted their prayer group and headed up to the hospital in Brockton Mass. So, I was well covered in prayer. I remained in coma and/or vegetative state for 3 mos. In Feb of 1986 I required a surgery which I was anesthetized for but could not receive pain meds following b/c they contraindicated with the anti-seizure meds I was on. I was in coma and seizing when the EMT's arrived at the accident.

So, the first thing I woke up to was feeling this horrible pain, the worst I'd ever felt in my life, that was in my abdomen. It felt like someone was sliding a knife in and out of my stomach. I was in this phase called the "agitated phase" where I could not stop moving. I was all tied up arms, legs, and mouth. The medical team put a piece of plastic in my mouth and aed bandaged it around my head to prevent biting of my tongue.

But the first communication I cognitively received was from my mother, who was at the foot of my bed crying as she said, "Jimmy, turn to Jesus on his cross, and ask him to take your pain away." Well, like I was saying I hadn't been to church in awhile, but ...? Everyone left and I was still in extreme pain so I just said to myself in my mind and spirit, "Jesus please take this pain." Suddenly, I was overcome with the most incredible feelings of Love, Joy, and Peace I had ever felt. I felt these feelings individually and together simultaneously. And each of the feelings were in such incredible amounts that if I were the "rubber man" and could open my arms and stretch them all the way around the Earth, the Universe could not contain all the love, all the

joy, and or all of the peace I was feeling independently and/or collectively. (Long after, and in retrospect, I concluded this was the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.)

But back at the hospital a day or two later I spoke my first words, and it was an entire sentence! I said, "Get me some water." Everyone, doctors included were astounded. The doctors were telling my parents after about 5-6 weeks if I remain vegetative, they are going to have to move me to a hospital for the "permanently vegetative" or a nursing home. B/c I was in my 3rd hospital at this point, and it was a rehab hospital, and I was taking up a needed bed.

Well, I started speaking and I was ranting and raving about of all things, "Jesus." My friends were visiting and my mother says to my best friend, "Wow! When did Jimmy get so into Jesus? This is great news of which we had no idea?" A friend said I spoke with Jim over an hour last week (prior to the accident), and believe you me, I heard nothing to do with Jesus. My mother did not realize it happened only after I took her advice and called on Jesus in my distress.

So, I started speaking and albeit a bit confused was communicating perfectly fine. This is the "vegetative" guy the doctors were saying would have to be relocated if I remained in vegetative state. I took a neuropsychological exam and scored high enough to be admitted to the world renowned Rusk Hospital cognitive head injury rehab program in NYC, NY. Well, I attended Rusk for 2 semesters full time, and left reading on a 9Th grade level. So, it appeared I had sustained massive permanent brain damage that even these experts could no longer help.

I returned to live with my parents in Westport, CT, and found a PT job 9 hrs/week working as a front desk person at a squash club in town. This was a very challenging job for me initially. It was at this time that I learned about how to read a spiritual along with the bible everyday. I wanted to get closer to this God who had touched me, and finally I had some time to begin this. And I read a passage from Isaiah which deeply touched me and was fully absorbed in my spirit: It is Isaiah 55:10-11 which says: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow fall down, and do not return there without first watering the earth, giving seed to him who sows, and bread to him who eats; so shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void."

So, about one yr later I returned to Rusk in NYC and take the neuropsychological exam. Of these results, the renowned doctor says in an exasperated voice, "What have you been reading?" I just said the bible. He said this is a miracle. I said what is? How did I do? He said you've scored college graduate in reading comprehension! I said I scored college level, and he said no you've scored college graduate level! He then said it doesn't matter what you have been reading. You could have been practicing reading comprehension tests for 8 hrs a day for the entire year, and you still would not have made anything like this improvement. He said in all his yrs he has never seen change even remotely close to this. I just said in my heart Praise the Lord.

Then I said so it looks like I can go back to college. He said slow down. Just b/c you can read at a college graduate level it doesn't mean you can compete with students who have not short-term memory problems, organizational skills deficits, attention/concentration deficits, sleeping problems, and a litany of other deficits associated with the severe head injury you lived through..... I said OK but thought in my heart I am sure I can do this God willing.

But I moved down to Richmond in 1990, and b/c I was unemployed my Mom suggested taking a class. So, I went down to VCU and signed up for an intro class in grad school in Rehab Counseling. I got an A, and after getting a part time job proceeded to take up to two grad classes a semester, and

graduated with a Master's Degree 5 and 1/2 yrs later. I also ended up with all A's and only one B in the program.

Now I want to be clear: Even though I have done all these things I still have many limiting deficits from my head injury that limit my abilities to progress. It is not as if I recovered completely and am as if I had no head injury at all.

If I can say without being too pretentious, I feel very similar to St Paul , and I can say maybe b/c I had such a magnificent 7Th heaven experience whether on earth or in heaven I do not know? But I too have been given a "thorn in my flesh" to keep me from becoming too elated. I still suffer pain in walking, and inadequate sleep, and an almost interminable fatigue that I've grown used to. But I know for sure where my salvation lies, in this life and world and in the world to come. And that lies in Jesus Christ who is risen and alive today just as in Israel 2000 yrs ago.

I also have been blessed due to this experience with an "ability" to truly and logically understand many of the scripture verses which confounded me prior to my experience. One example, in the first chapter of Colossians 1:15 it reads: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

This is one of the verses that confounded me prior, but now makes literal and logical sense.

I hope and pray my experience with the Lord can inspire and give hope to all. Just as Paul says in his letter to the Romans 15:13, *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

May God bless you and keep you. Amen