## SERMON NOTES — August 23, 2026

**Time Travel to 1st Century Roman Empire**

- I'm a Trekkie, a fan of the Star Trek TV series and movies, partly because I also love time travel stories, and many of their most memorable episodes involve time travel. Well, I'd like to begin by imagining ourselves time-traveling back to the 1st Century Roman empire.
- Our main mission is to give consideration to many of the titles we traditionally use for Jesus: such as Savior, Son of God, Messiah or Christ, Redeemer, and Lord. But we need to time travel to hear them anew.
- For example, a 1st Century inscription prominently displayed in the port city of Mira, Turkey: "son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world." It's an inscription not to Jesus but to, "divine Augusta Caesar." This is the kind of inscription written all over the Roman Empire, prominently displayed in cities that wanted to make sure Caesar knew they were loyal — so that he didn't come with an army to destroy them! (Reminds you of King George in the musical *Hamilton*, "I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love.")
- Caesar called himself "son of God" and "savior," and expected others to do the same.
- So now our time travel imagines you as a follower of Jesus in the 1st Century Roman Empire, and you call Jesus "Son of God," "Savior," and "Lord." What are you doing?
- Another familiar word, "evangelism," changes within the 1st Century. It comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which we translate as "Good News," or "Gospel." In the 1st Century Roman Empire, *euangelion* was most often reserved for an imperial decree. Caesar would send out heralds throughout the empire to announce Good News about his military victories.
- Imagine you're at the First Christmas: the angel messenger (the word *angel* is in the word *evangel*!), or herald, says to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for behold — I am bringing you good news (*euangelion*) of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the *Messiah*, the liberating king, the Lord."
- One more. You are following Jesus, this new rabbi, and he says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; transform your minds [like Rom 12:1-2!], and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Is Jesus making his own imperial proclamation about bringing God's reign, a new politics?

**New Confirmand Paul Nuechterlein Time Travels Fifty Years into the Future**

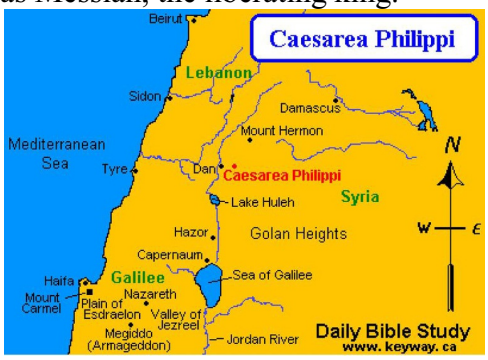
- I'd like to imagine for a moment a personal time travel story. I'm confirmed at Faith Lutheran Church in 1970 in Livonia, Michigan. I've gone to church nearly every Sunday all my life, enjoying hundreds of sermons. Let's say that that fourteen year-old Paul Nuechterlein time travels fifty-six years into the future and listens to Pastor Paul preach a sermon today.
- I imagine shock due to my young self hearing quite a different version of the Gospel than what I grew up with. Sure, some of the basics are the same. But many of the emphases and focuses are new, and so even the basics are reframed. *Pastor* Paul has had fifty years to gradually change his mind; *Confirmand* Paul would be uncomfortable, at the very least, and would want to know where these changes to the Gospel have come from.
- I acknowledge, in other words, that while this shift in perspective on the Gospel has happened gradually for me, it still may be rather new for you. But that's another reason to hear anew St. Paul's words in the Second Reading today. This Gospel thing requires that we "be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect."
- The opening time-travel exercise is meant to help us see anew that God in Jesus the Messiah came to give us a wholly new *politics* for living together in peace. Being human means living

in community with others, so it means having a politics — rules and guidelines for being able to live together. And so a new way of being human requires a new politics.

- That's why the early church, and even Jesus himself, used titles like son of God, Savior, and Lord — titles that Caesar used. It's what got Jesus killed. And his early followers followed his lead by using these titles to challenge Caesar's lordship! They were putting their faith in a new reign, a new kingdom, a new kind of politics.

**The Acted-Out Parable of a 'Nominating Convention' at Caesarea Philippi**

- The Gospel Reading for these next two weeks is a case in point — basically Jesus staging a nominating convention of sorts to lay out his candidacy as Messiah, the liberating king.
- First of all, he carefully chooses the site. Caesarea Philippi was regional capital for the Roman Empire. It was thirty-five miles north of Galilee; there is no reason for Jesus to take his disciples there except for the political and religious significant of it.




- So once there Jesus pops the question, seeking their nomination, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The title son of Man refers to Book of Daniel chapter 7, where Daniel has this wild dream of terrifying beasts who represent the violent empires who have oppressed the Jewish people over the centuries. And then a "son of Man" appears, representing one who is truly human. God gives rulership over to the "Son of Man" — symbolizing the Jewish hope in the 1st Century.
- After some disappointing answers from his disciples, Jesus gets more direct: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Right answer!
- By now, I hope you can appreciate how political this exchange is. Peter nominates Jesus as the Messiah. Peter's basically saying, "I get it. Caesar isn't Lord, you are." Jesus gives him high praise, telling him that he's the rock on which Jesus will build his church, and that not even the Gates of Hades will prevail against it in the struggle to introduce humankind to God's entirely new and different politics.
- "Gates of Hades," the final clue in today's acted out parable. Hades was the name of the underworld in Greek culture, the place below the earth where people went when they die. Not necessarily a hellish place, but like so much else it was a symbol of Roman power. Rome had the power to send you to Hades before your time. And it just so happens that one of the places they considered to be a 'gate' to Hades was in Caesarea Philippi: a large cave opening in the rock face that purportedly led down to Hades. The picture is an artist's rendering of what Jesus and the disciples were looking at, as Jesus prompted them to proclaim him as the Messiah, the new king whose people, the church, would prevail in a long struggle with the politics of empire.

**Artist's rendering of 1st Century Caesarea Philippi**

- Next week, we have Jesus' nominating speech where he tells the disciples just *how different his politics are*. Peter's great moment in the spotlight will fade as he completely misunderstands and even threatens to be a stumbling block to Jesus' mission. Done with time travel, we will ask what this means for us today, as humankind continues its struggle with the deadly politics of nationalistic empire.