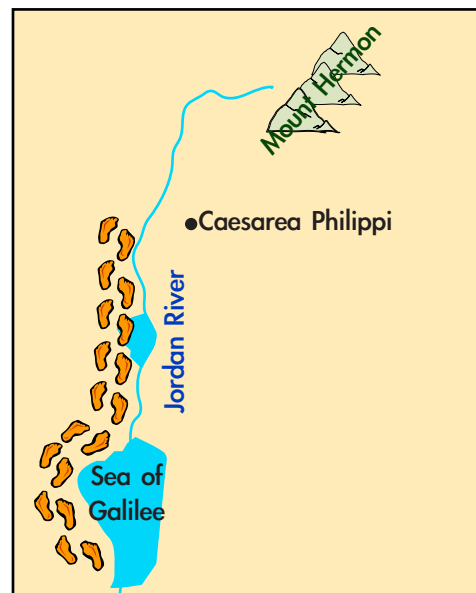


# Tour of the Holy Lands - Caesarea Philippi



Jesus and his disciples set out one day trekking north from the Sea of Galilee along the Jordan River. We pretended we were following them. Of course, we couldn't really follow them. That was 2000 years ago, but if we could have seen them out our bus window, they probably would have been carrying their traveling baskets with food for a few days, as well as walking sticks for the 25 mile trip. (Matt 16:13-24; Mark 8:27-34)



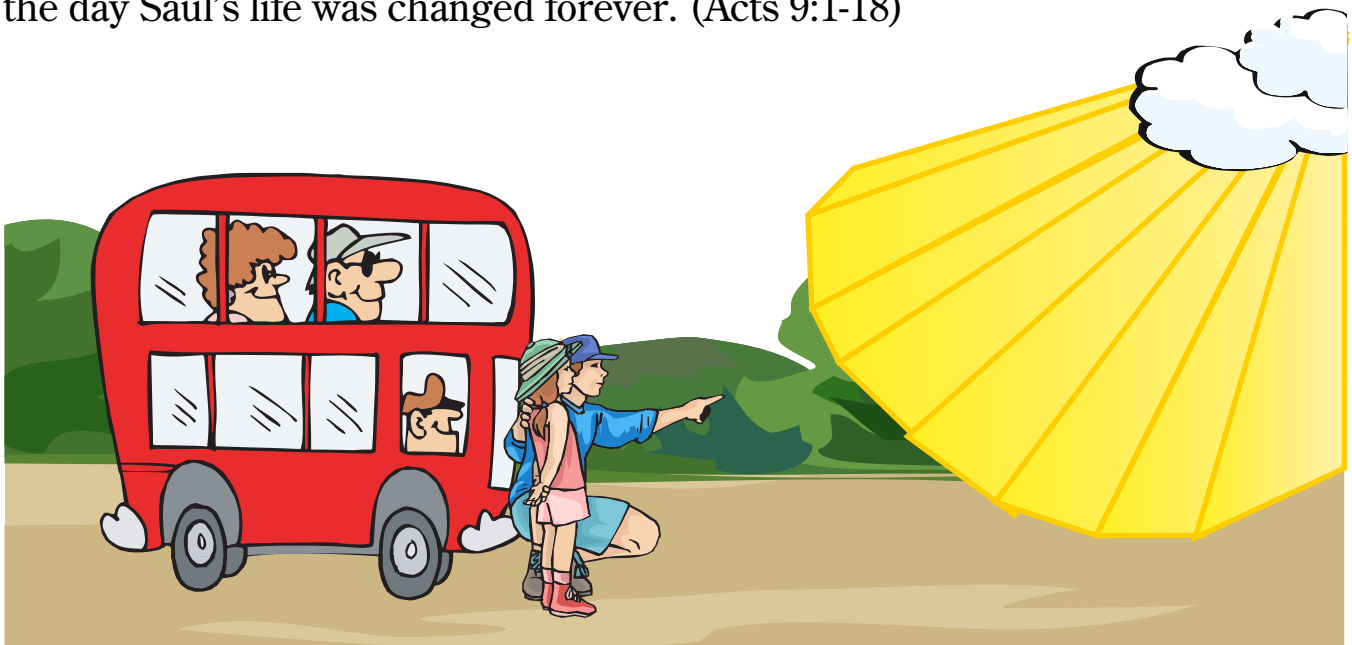


Two thousand years have passed since Jesus, but Mount Hermon ahead of us in the distance has stayed the same. It's still the highest point in Israel - 9,000 feet high. It still has beautiful ribbons of snow streaming down its slopes. The snow still melts and provides water for three countries - Lebanon to the north, (Jesus would have called it Phoenicia), Syria to the east, and Israel to the south. (Psalms 133:3) Mount Hermon stood for love, harmony, and brotherhood.



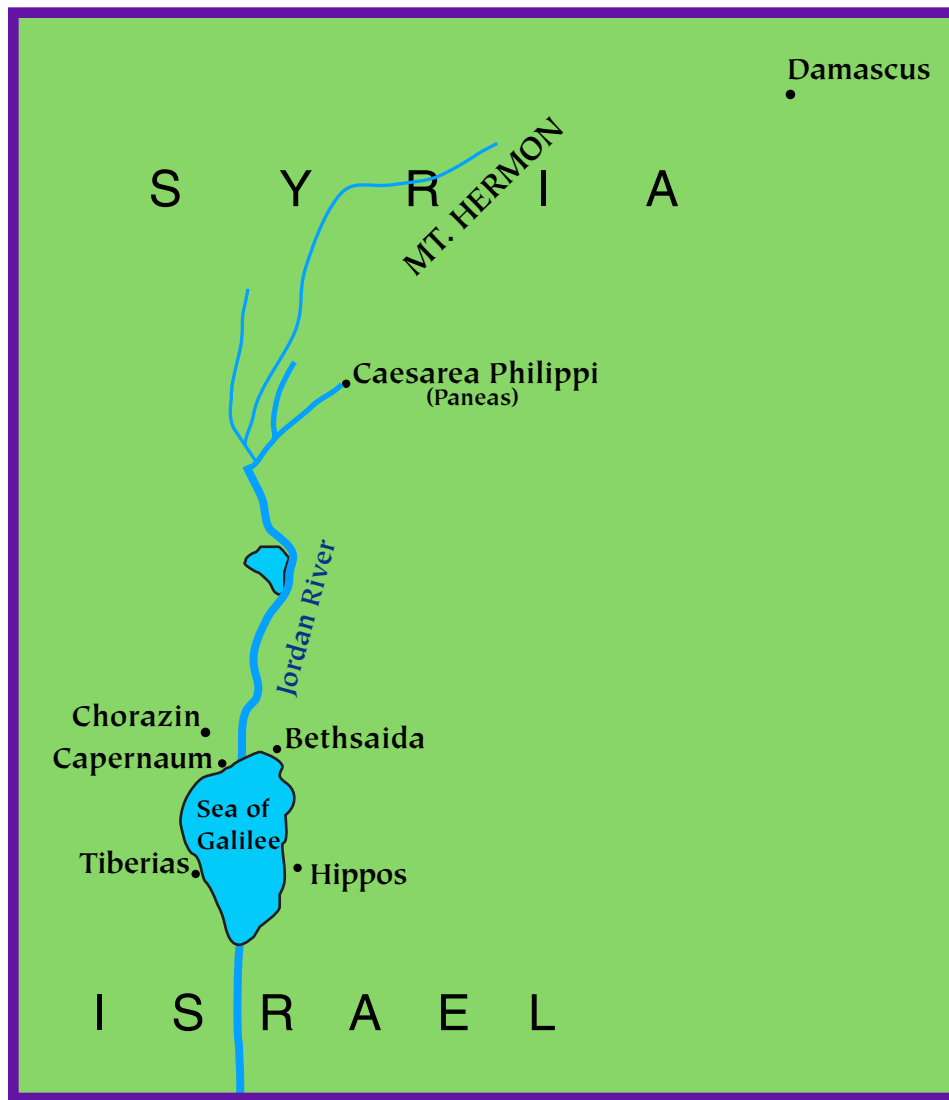


Jesus and his disciples were walking along the Road to Damascus, the same road Saul of Tarsus took to arrest more of the early Christians. It might have been just about here on the road that Saul and his companions would have turned northeast. We climbed out of the bus and looked up at the sky that lit up so brightly upon Saul. That was the day the Christ spoke to him. That was the day Saul's life was changed forever. (Acts 9:1-18)





We pulled out our binoculars to see if we could see the walls of Damascus in the distance, but it was too far away. We remembered Saul's story, how his new friends, ("Christians," they were called later), saved his life in an unusual way. When the Jews heard that Saul had become a Christian, they set out to kill him. But Saul escaped. How? The local Christians put him in a basket, lifted him up and let him down over the city wall. We sure wish we could have been there to see that! (Acts 9:23-25)



Jesus' goal that day was to reach Caesarea Philippi, named after the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Philip the local governor and builder of the city, one of the sons of Herod the Great, added his own name. Now, no one would confuse the names of the two cities - Caesarea Philippi and Caesarea by the Sea.

It was a religious place in Jesus' day, but not for Jews, who worshiped the one God. Instead, it was a religious place for pagans, who worshiped Greek and Roman gods. Ordinary Jews would never even go there. It was unclean, and they would become unclean if they had come near. Remember, we learned about that when we were in Caesarea by the Sea?





Those Jewish leaders who argued with Jesus, who tried to stop his work and destroy him, would never follow him to the unclean city of Caesarea Philippi. But Jesus was not afraid of going anywhere. His time was short. He needed privacy and a quiet place. He was about to tell his disciples something very important.



As soon as we arrived, we could see why Caesarea Philippi was special. It was unlike anywhere else in Israel. It was a magical place where plants and trees grew large, where wild flowers covered the hillsides, and where streams and springs bubbled up clear and clean. In fact, the waters of the Jordan River began right here.

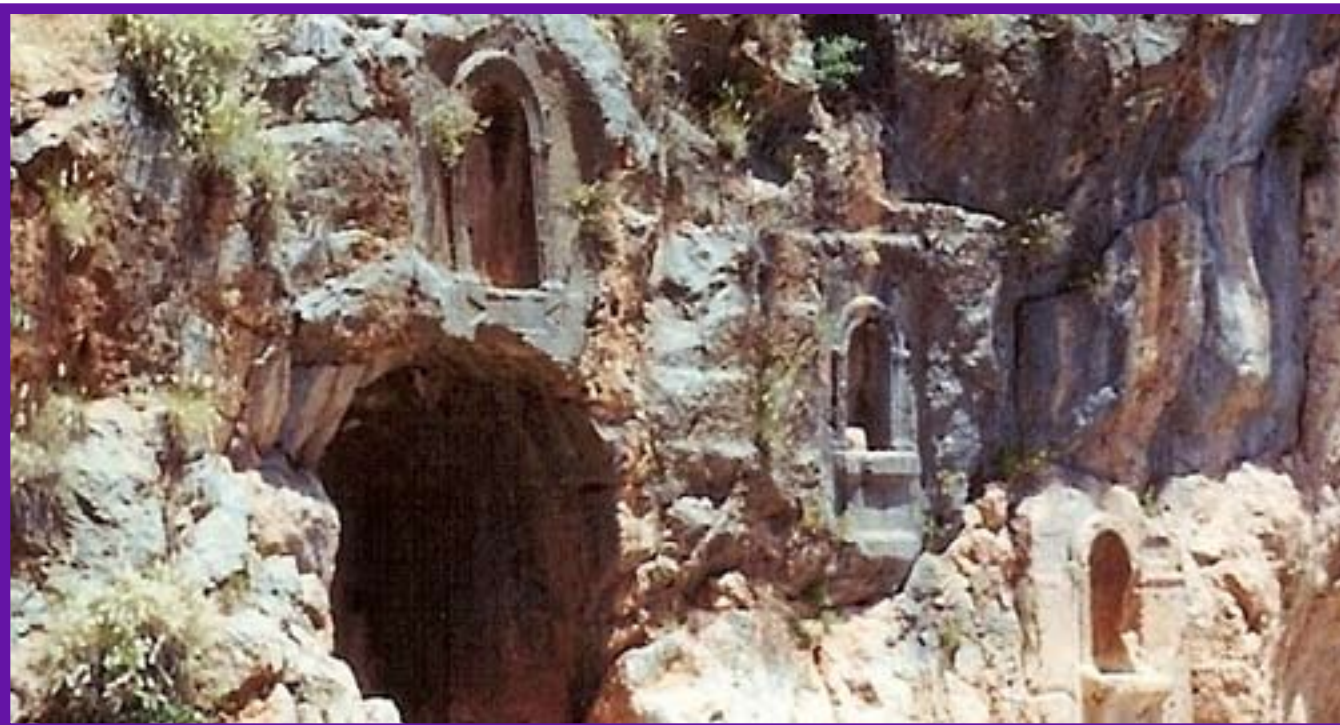




Before the Romans governed Israel, this area was not called Caesarea; it was called Paneas, named after the Greek god Pan, who protected hunters and shepherds. They believed that Pan was part man, part animal. He walked on his hind feet, had a pair of small horns, a crooked nose, a tail, and goat's feet. His legs were covered with shaggy hair, and he played a shepherd's pipe. We think pagans had great imaginations.

They say he was born right in that cave over there, the center of pagan worship. The cave was called "The Gates of Hades." In it was a lake so deep, they say, that no one ever found the bottom. It was a perfect place for those who believed in the mischief of gods and goddesses.





The story was that Pan could be dangerous if he was disturbed at noon. He would scream so loudly that he caused people to “panic,” or he played with rocks causing “pandemonium.” If he was in a good mood, he would run through the woods playing his pipe. Pan’s girlfriend, Echo, also lived there. She was a nymph. A goddess once punished her by taking away her voice, so she could only repeat the last words of those who spoke to her. Pan’s father, Hermes, was the merriest of the gods. He loved to play tricks. To Jesus and his disciples, these stories must have sounded like fairy tales.

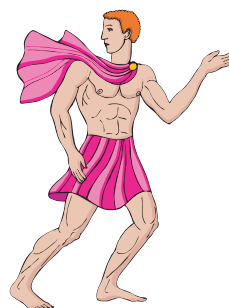
We looked on the side of the cliff next to the cave and saw three empty holes, called “niches.” In them, Jesus and his disciples would have seen three carved stone figures of Pan, Echo, and Hermes.



**PAN**



**ECHO**



**HERMES**



Here, in this peaceful place with no religious leaders following them around, Jesus could have his disciples' full attention. He began his important lesson with a question, "What have people been saying about me? Who do they think I am?" (He'd become very popular and people were talking about him everywhere.)

We knew the answer, but we wanted to hear again what the Bible had to say. The disciples said, "Some say you're John the Baptist. Some say you're Elijah. Some say that you're Jeremiah." What strange answers! It's true these three men were supposed to prepare the way for the Messiah, but they were dead. Yet, some people believed that they were so good, that they could rise from the dead.

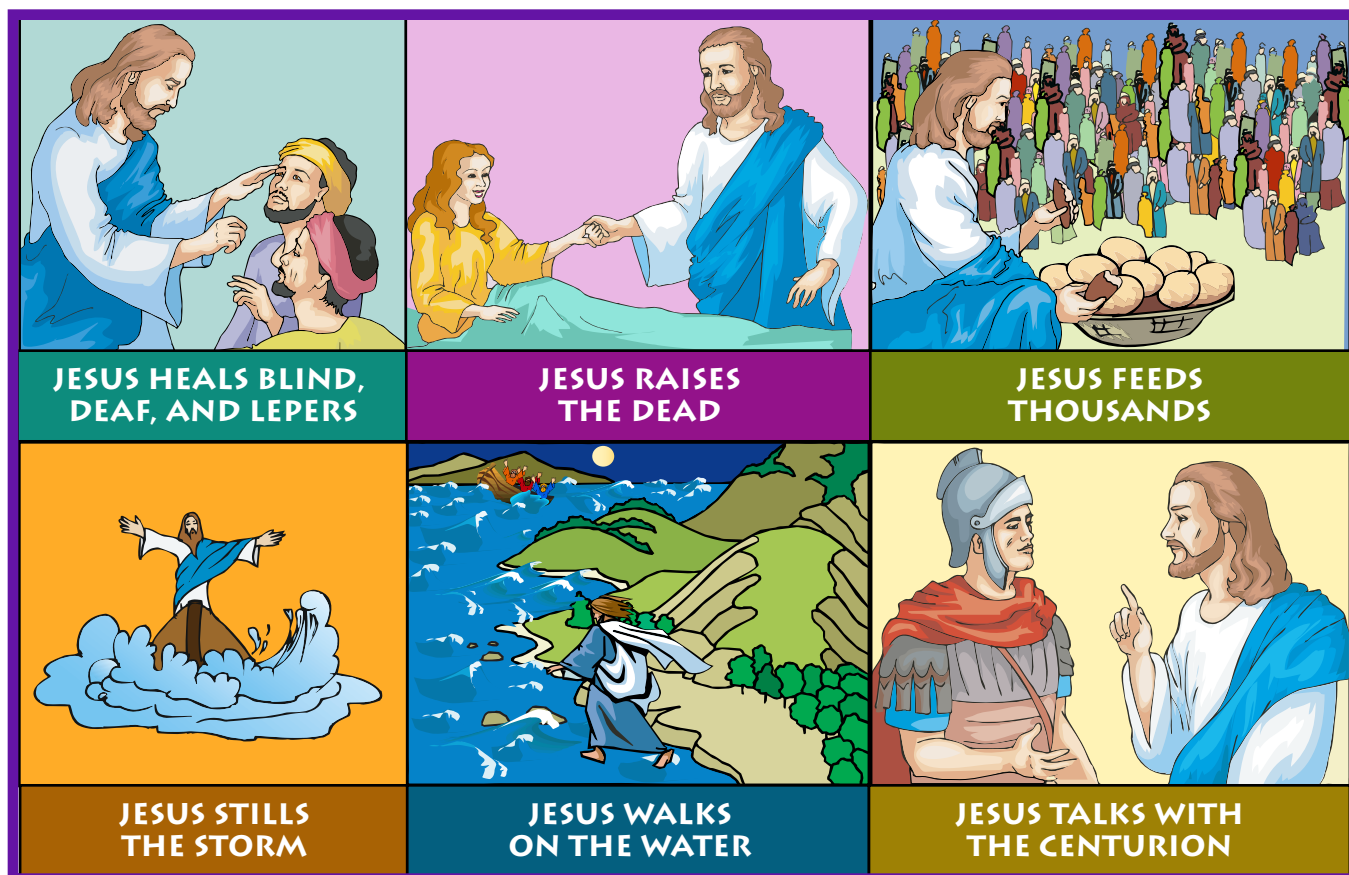




We had learned the word “Messiah” in Sunday school. It comes from a Hebrew word meaning “anointed.” God would anoint a special person with qualities for a special job. The word “Christ” comes from a Greek word, also meaning “anointed.” Jesus probably spoke three languages - Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. Aramaic was the language Jesus and his family spoke every day at home, at the market and with friends. Jesus needed to be understood by everyone.

The Jews had always been told by God they were a special people, that they would have a special place in the world and that they would bless the world. They waited, but that hadn't happened yet. Instead, they had been conquered over and over by many nations and taken away as slaves. Some of them were lost forever. Now the Romans ruled their land. The Jews believed that the Messiah would come and save them from their enemies. Then there would be peace that would last forever.

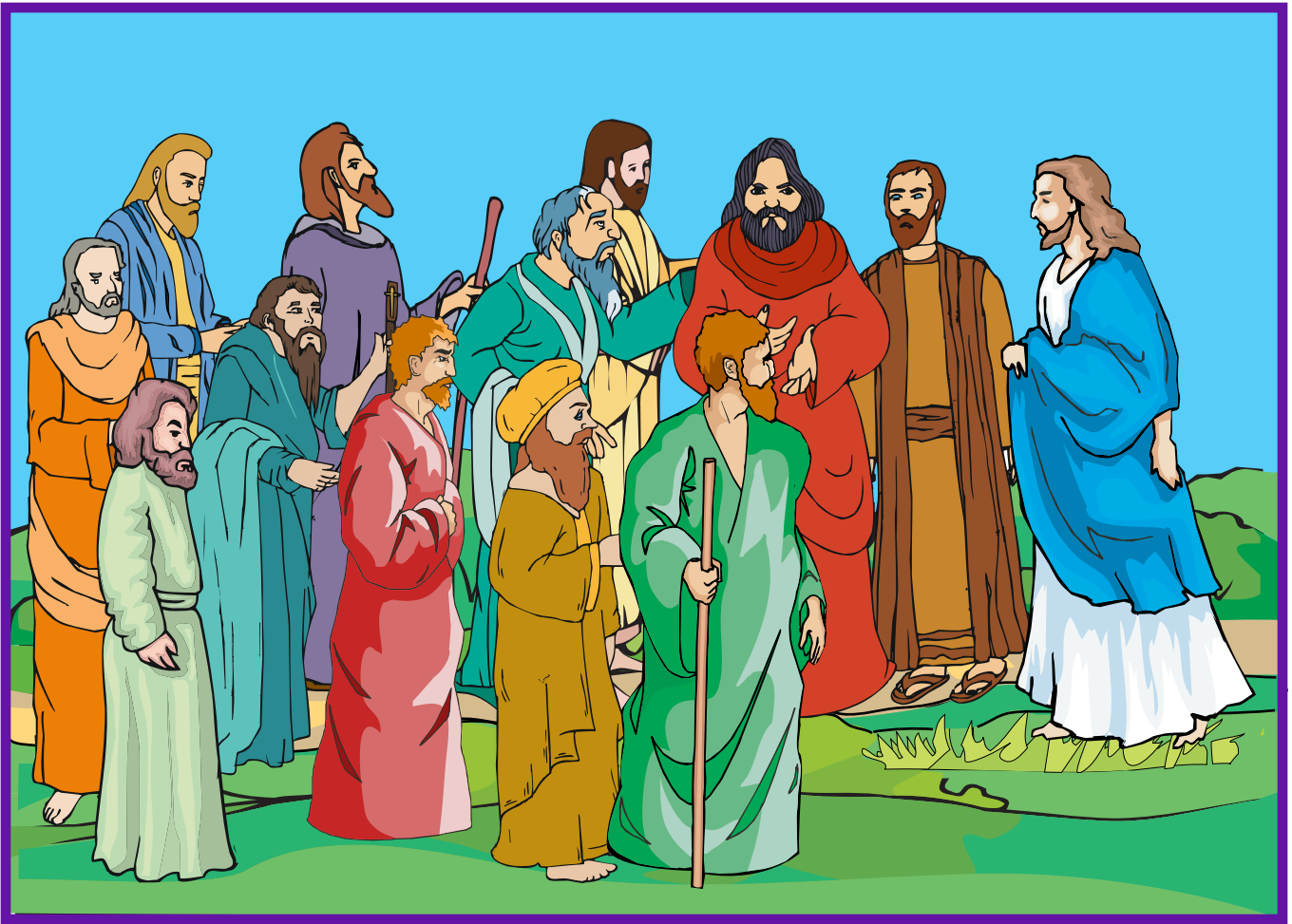




We were puzzled and disappointed. Why didn't the people guess that Jesus was the Messiah? Was it because he wasn't acting like the Messiah? He certainly had great powers. He could do the impossible: heal the blind, the deaf, and the lepers; raise the dead; feed thousands; still a storm; and walk on water. Was it because he never carried a weapon or tried to be their king?

Jesus never hated anyone. He treated everyone the same. In fact, Jesus once complimented a Roman soldier. He told this Centurion he had more faith than the Jews did. (Matt 8:10; Luke 7:9) Who was Jesus, then?

It's true, he never told them he was the Messiah or Christ. He thought they could learn that by his example. Then they would understand what the Christ really was. It was not a warrior or king. The Christ power was the power of God's love.



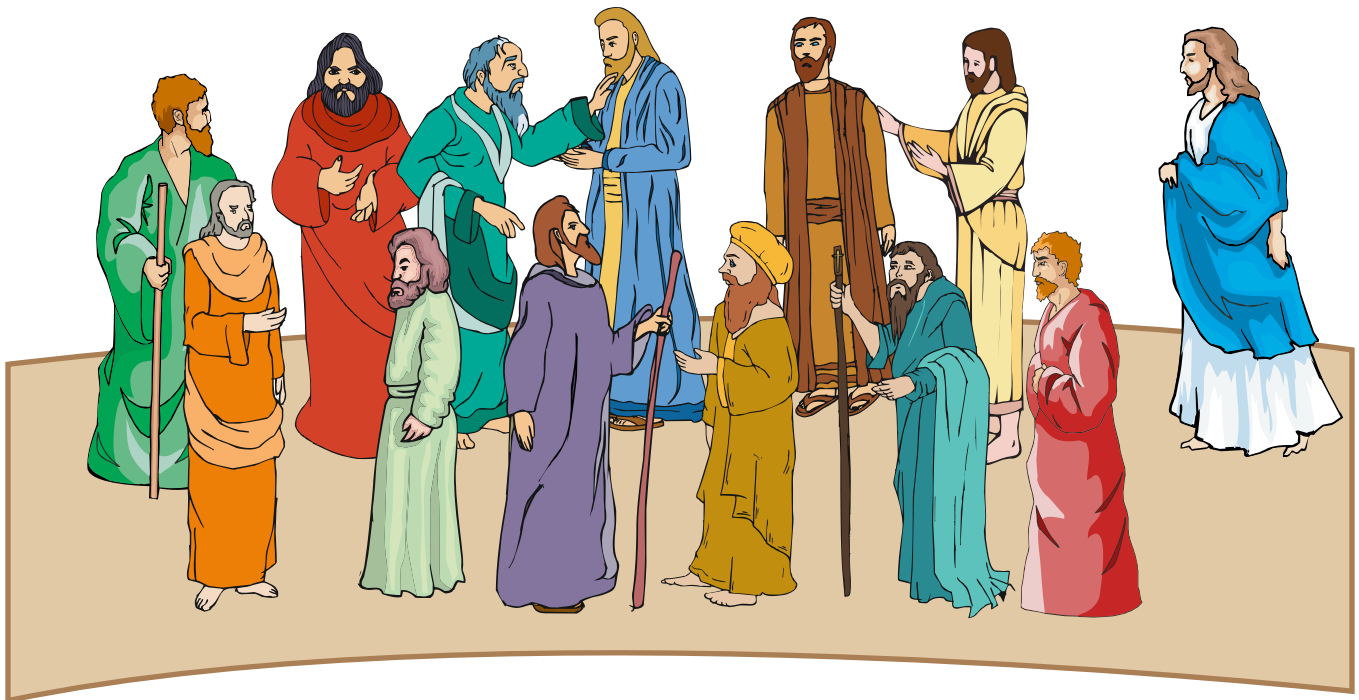
Jesus tried again. “But who do *you* think I am?” We wanted to give hints to the disciples. We wanted to let them know how important their answer would be. If those twelve got it right, if they recognized the Christ and followed the Christ example correctly, then all Christians after them would get it right and we would get it right today, too.



Here in this peaceful forest with only the sounds of birds, rustling leaves, and rushing waters, with pagans imagining the sounds of Pan's pipes and Echo's voice, Jesus listened and waited for an answer from his disciples.

And then it came, "You are the Christ! You are the Son of the living God."

Who said that? The disciples looked around at each other.







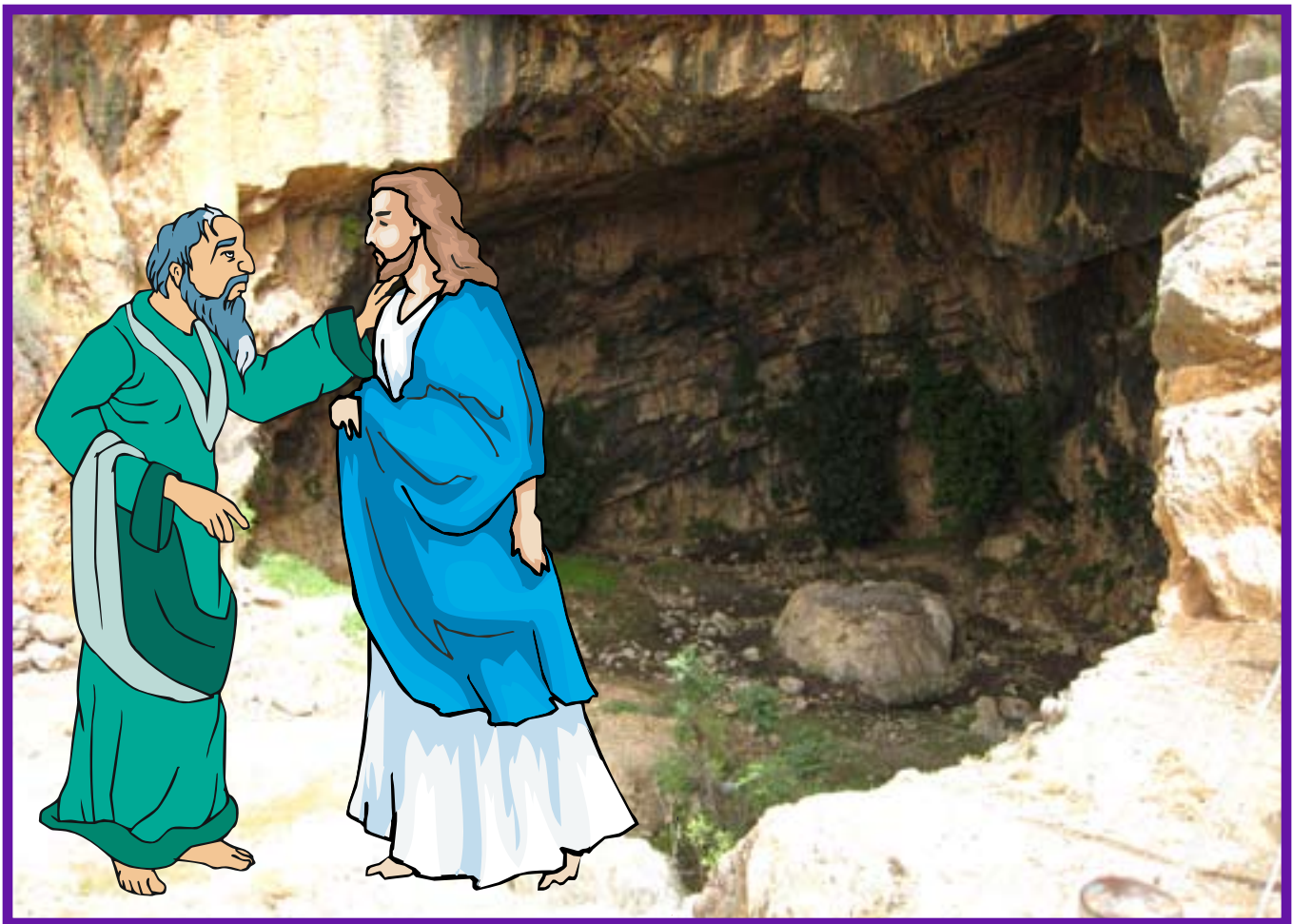
It was Simon Peter!

Jesus said, “Good for you Simon, son of Jona.”

We asked each other, “How did Simon know the right answer? He hadn’t been at Jesus’ baptism to hear God say those words - ‘You are my loved son.’”

Jesus said, “You have a human father, but you heard the truth straight from my Father in heaven. I say that your name is now ‘Peter’ (meaning ‘rock’) and you really are a rock. You know the truth about me and nothing anybody says is going to change your mind.”

We decided that if Jesus had ever given *us* the name “Rock,” we sure would try to live up to it. We looked down into the water. We were like the stones in this clear stream - Christian kids standing where Peter stood. We come from a long line of believers, chips off the same rock, who know the true Christ. But Peter was the first - the Rock. We stones make up his strong Church. In the end, nothing could shake Peter. Nothing can shake us.



Jesus told Peter that not even the gates of hell could shake his church. Pagans believed the gates of hell were right there in the cave. They worshiped there. They threw sacrifices into the cave. They believed that these gates had the power of evil, of fear, of death. But guess what? Those threats were as empty as the cave. Jesus wasn't afraid to be there. He taught the kingdom of heaven which was everywhere. The power of that kingdom was greater than anything, and he gave Peter the keys to the kingdom. After Jesus was gone, Peter would unlock the gates to the kingdom for many, many people.



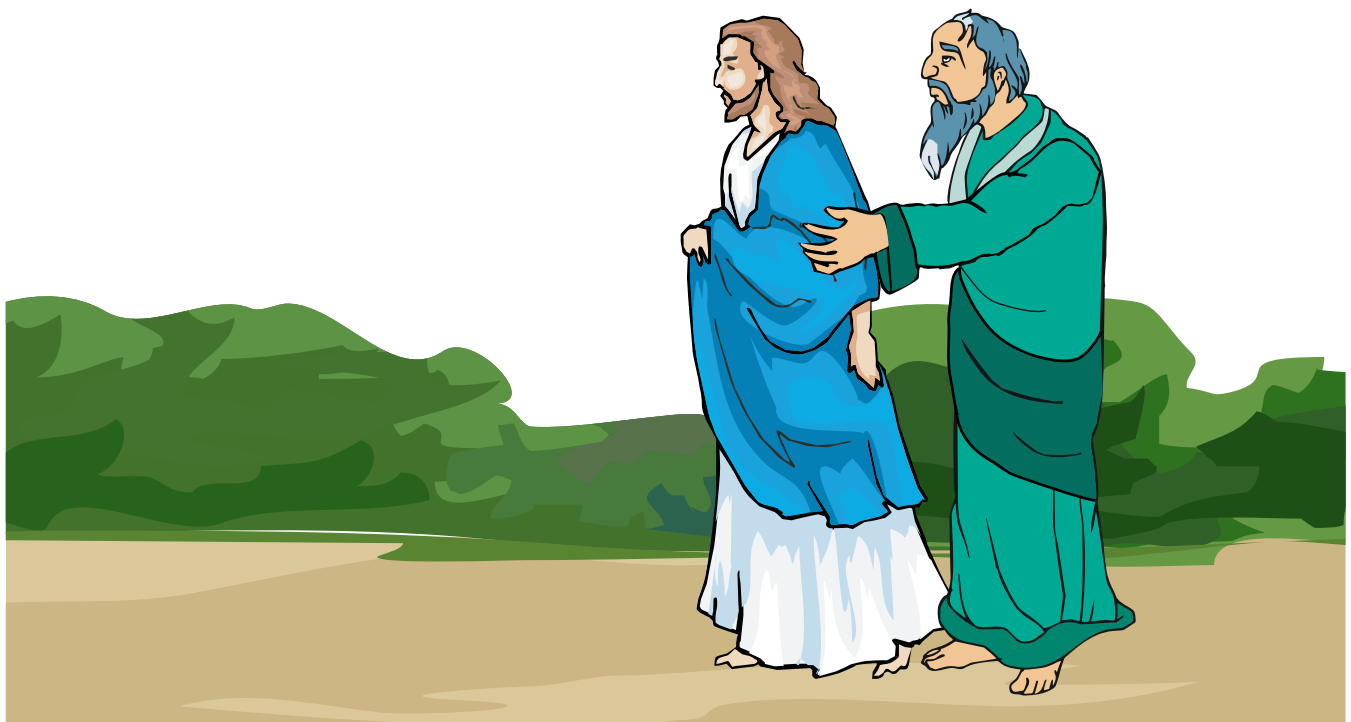


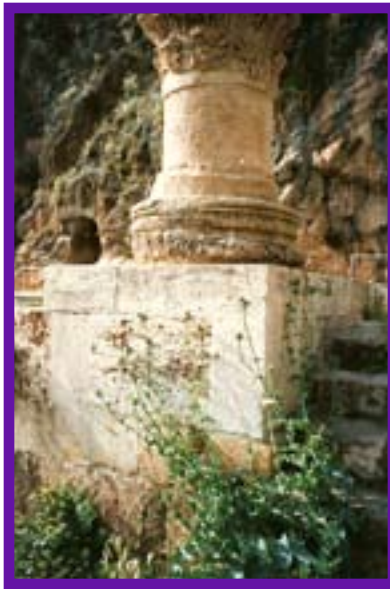
Jesus must have been so grateful that one of his disciples knew the correct answer to his question. At least one disciple recognized who he really was. He never was the kind of Messiah expected by the Jews. But he showed them the *true* Messiah by his example and Peter saw it. Jesus could leave the rest of the disciples in good hands. Now, he could tell them the rest of the story.





Jesus said, “I am only going to be with you a short time. Here's what's going to happen. I am going to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed by those Jewish leaders and rise again the third day.” But the only words Peter heard was that Jesus would suffer and be killed. He took Jesus by the arm and said, “Never!” That was not going to happen to the teacher he loved. And besides, who ever heard of a dying Messiah?





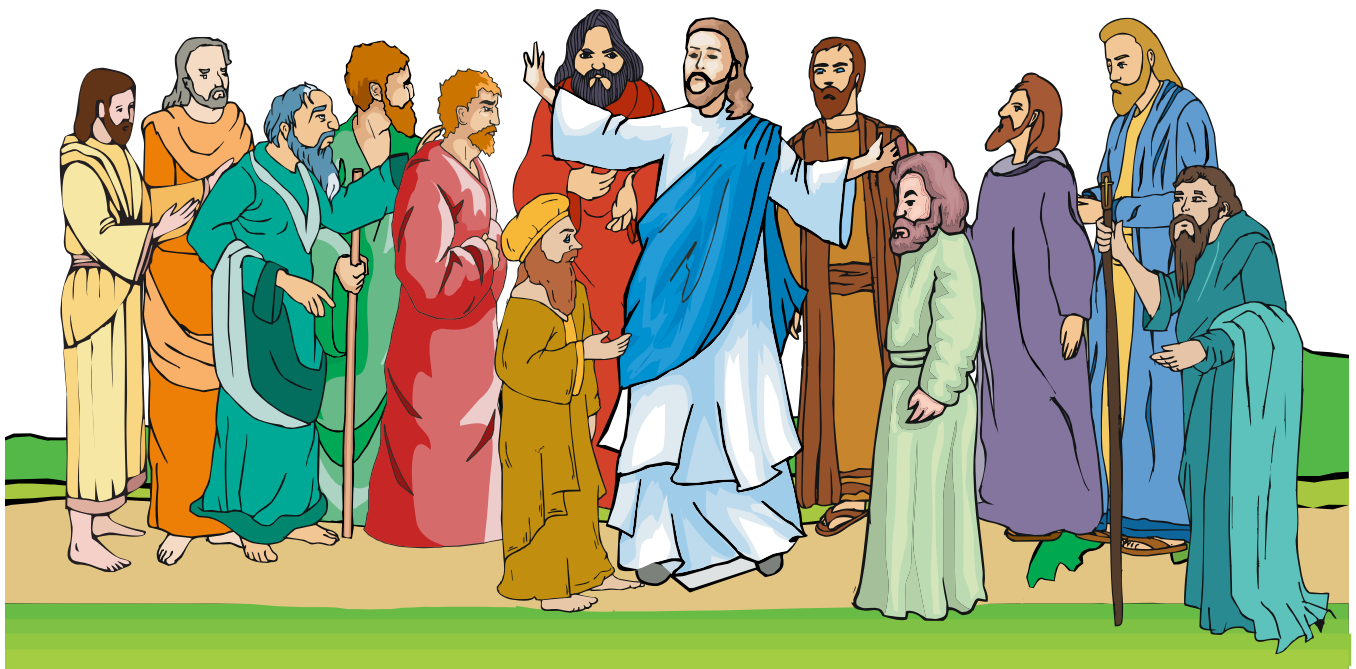
Just when Jesus was so pleased with Peter, Peter tried to stop him. How would Jesus reply? His quick answer was, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” We always wondered why Jesus said that. No, of course, Peter wasn’t really Satan, but Peter tried to stop Jesus the same way Satan tried to stop him a few years before. Jesus came to do God’s will, and anything or anyone that tried to prevent him from obeying God or that tried to make him take the easy path, he called “Satan,” even if it came from a good friend like Peter. Jesus probably meant, “Get behind me, follow me, support me. Be a rock for me to lean on, not a stumbling block for me to trip over.” He said, “Your words this time are not from God, they’re from men.”





Jesus loved them. He said, “If you want to follow me, you must give up what *you* want and listen for what *God* wants you to do. You must be brave. You must be prepared to go forward no matter what. This is what it means to follow me.”

We wished we could sit those disciples down on a rock. We wished we could tell them that everything was going to be okay. Stick with Jesus. Listen to his every word. He’ll be asking for your help. Give it to him. Don’t run away. Be with him when he’s in trouble. It will be a scary time because he’ll be giving his life. But it won’t be the end of the story. He’ll be back in three days to tell you more.







Jesus asked them all to keep it secret that he was the Messiah. There would be a better time to tell the rest of the people.

What an important lesson there was to learn at Caesarea Philippi! And what a beautiful place to learn it!

