



Lectionary 21, Year A

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13th Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Matthew 16:13-20

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

SERMON TEXT:

This episode from the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew has some pretty typical characters: Jesus, the disciples, and Peter. But there is another "character" - if you will - in this scene we really don't know much about - and that is the setting.

When I was in seminary, one of the lenses we would sometimes use to look at scripture is that of narrative (or literary) criticism.

This lens is called "criticism" not in that it is critical of the biblical text, evaluating if it is good or bad, but rather looking at literary devices like plot, setting, characterization, and point of view and how that shapes the audience's experience and conveys underlying meaning.

This school of biblical study takes seriously the fact that the Gospel writers were indeed authors and storytellers - not news reporters just covering the facts. None of the Gospels cover the entirety of Jesus' life or ministry, so this approach to biblical study assumes that the Gospel writers made deliberate choices regarding the events of Jesus' life and ministry they included and the way they structured their Gospel.

I share this as an introduction to telling you about Caesarea Philippi and before we look at what actually took place - for the setting of this episode from Jesus' ministry is no accident.

I'm borrowing here from a devotion written by author Mike Velthouse, and he sets the scene like this:

Jesus and his group had traveled about 30 miles - a two day journey north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus brought them to this

specific location because the place held some incredible monuments of Roman and Greek pagan worship.

Caesarea Philippi received its name from Herod Philip in honor of Caesar Augustus and himself (no ego there!). To the far left of where Jesus and the disciples likely stood was located a white marble temple built by Herod the Great in honor of Caesar Augustus. This monument facilitated the worship of the Caesars, who declared themselves gods.

And here at the foot of Mount Hermon was located one of Israel's most extensive rock formations. Carved into that craggy, limestone mountain cliff were niches, fourteen mini-temples, that contained statues of Greek gods, such as Hermes, Nemesis, and Echo.

On the ground below was a large platform where several pagan and humanist shrines had been constructed. In the middle stood a sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god Zeus.

The most essential god worshipped in Caesarea Philippi was Pan, the Greek god of nature, livestock, and fertility. Carved into the cliff face was a grotto that contained a statue of Pan, with the hind quarters and horns of a goat, and the upper body of a man.

The goat was the sacred animal of this god, so the platform below included a section called the Temple of the Goats. Worshippers would dance there with live goats before choosing one as an offering to Pan.

And standing there with the disciples, you might have seen water rushing out of a cave located behind Caesar's temple and next to the statue of Pan. In that cave, seventy-two springs inside Mount

Hermon converged into a wild and tumultuous current that flowed down and gushed out onto the mountainside - this is a major source of the Jordan River. The gathered waters in the cave were so deep that no one could explore inside.

This cavern became known to the people of this region as the "Gates of Hell." They believed Pan and other gods of the underworld lived inside. It was into this cave that the pagan people threw their sacrificial goats.

So - with thanks to Mike Velthouse for describing the setting - I invite you to now put yourself into the midst of this scene from the Gospel of Matthew.

You have been traveling with Jesus - watching him do miracles and heal people and answer questions from scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees who are trying to test him.

Then one day you come to Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus turns to you all and asks "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

- "Son of Man" is a term Jesus uses to refer to himself

After some answers are offered, he looks at you all and asks "But who do you say that I am?"

What would be your answer? Who is Jesus?

The Gospel writers make it clear up front.

Matthew 1:1 - "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Mark 1:1 - "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ."

Luke is more of a storyteller - and has a flair for the dramatic.

In the first chapter of his Gospel, he has an angel show up and talk to a young woman named Mary: "Do not be

afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

And John - this one is my favorite - opens with these words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The Gospel writers make it clear up front who Jesus is - in the first chapter if not the very first verse - and then lay out the story of how people came to recognize who Jesus is.

But those Gospels are written decades later - imagine you are living it in real time - walking along with Jesus and the disciples. How would you answer the question?

Jesus asks, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
Responses include:

John the Baptist - he would be most recent in people's memories and Jesus resembled his ministry in many ways

Others suggest Elijah - one of the great prophets in the Old Testament - who was to be precursor to the Messiah
And still others say Jeremiah or another prophet - perhaps this was based on the content of Jesus' teaching - or that he would speak for God.

Then Jesus looks at them: "Who do **you** say that I am?"

And here - in Caesarea Philippi - in the midst of all of these symbols and places of worship of pagan Gods - Simon Peter speaks up: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"the living God" was one of the ways the Jewish people identified the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

Peter names the God of their ancestors - who is so different from all of these other gods worshiped at this place - and identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God.

Jesus congratulates him - and we get the story behind his name. Up to this point, he has been known among the disciples as Simon, son of Jonah - to distinguish him from the other Simon: Simon the Zealot.

The name Peter is from the Greek word *petros* - which means rock - the same word from which we get petroleum.

Jesus affirms Simon Peter's answer by declaring his confession to be the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

Indeed, the very foundation of Christianity is that Jesus is the Messiah, God's only son.

Then, Jesus adds this phrase "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The inclusion of this phrase was not just some hyperbole or a clever line used by Jesus.

Remember that huge cave I told you about while setting the scene? The people of that region called it the "Gates of Hell" and believed the gods of the underworld lived inside.

Standing there - in view of the "Gates of Hell" - Jesus declares Peter's confession to be so solid that even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And then - Jesus "sternly orders" then not to tell anyone he is the Messiah.

WHY???

They had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah!

Well, this admonition to not tell anyone about him happens frequently enough in the Gospels that biblical scholars call this "the Messianic Secret." It is another one of those literary devices used by the authors of the Gospels.

Why were they not to tell anyone?

Simply put - the general populace was not ready for this information.

You see, there were many differing expectations around the

Messiah.

The Hebrew word "Messiah" means "anointed" - in Greek it is "Christ" - so we often speak of Jesus the Messiah - or Jesus the Christ (shortened to just Jesus Christ) - meaning "Jesus the anointed."

In the Bible, many different people are anointed: Kings, prophets, warriors.

All of these "anointed" types were included in the differing expectations of the nature of the Messiah.

Many expected a successor to King David - someone who would restore the fortunes of Israel and kick out the Roman oppressors.

So that's part of the reason for the Messianic Secret - if the idea that Jesus was the Messiah spread too soon or too quickly, Jesus might find himself - against his will - at the center of a popular uprising - really just a figurehead.

No - there needed to be more time for Jesus to unveil *his* understanding of Messiah

In a way - the expectations of prophet-king-warrior were right:

A prophet: Jesus speaks for God and helps us to understand the character of God.

A king: one who reigns. A common piece of furniture for kings of the ancient world was a footstool on which were symbols of the peoples subject to the king - they were under his reign - under his feet. We are told in scripture that God has put everything under Jesus' feet - he reigns

over the whole world.

A warrior: one who does battle

- the hope for the Messiah was to rid Israel of their oppressors (i.e. the Romans - and anyone else)
- But that was shortsighted - and why Jesus needed more time - for the people of Israel were under even greater oppression than from Rome
- Indeed, what is more oppressive than sin?
- What is more oppressive than death?

THESE - sin and death - are what Jesus went to battle with - and WON

This is the testimony of the cross and the empty tomb

THAT is the rock upon which Jesus intends to build the church - the recognition that Jesus is prophet - King - warrior/victor

THAT is what defines the true nature of a church

- where Christ is central
- where *ALL* is placed under his reign
- where everything is subjected to the criteria of making the love and grace of God known

This is the good news that Jesus is going to entrust to Peter and the disciples - the rock upon which his church will be built:

Jesus is the Son of the living God - the creator of heaven and earth - and Jesus was anointed by God to do battle with sin and death - and he came out the victor.

Through our baptism, we are joined to the death, resurrection, and new life of Jesus - and we are given the promise of eternal life. All of this is ours as a gift from our

loving and gracious God - who puts no condition on it - and simply calls us to live within the relationship God has already created for us, and to reflect the love and grace of God into the lives of those around us.

Now - what does all of this mean for us today? After all, we don't find ourselves in Caesarea Philippi.

But we do find ourselves in the midst of countless other gods - things that people give ultimate allegiance to or that are the central focus of their lives.

Things like wealth, popularity, sports, power and influence, drugs, political party, social media, and the list goes on.

So - if you were to be asked today - surrounded by all of these modern day gods, just like the disciples were surrounded by the pagan gods at Caesarea Philippi - if you were to be asked today: Who do you say Jesus is?

And perhaps more importantly: What implications does *who you say Jesus is* hold for your life as you find yourself surrounded by all of these other gods - and people "worshiping" them?

Mike Velthouse concluded his devotion in this way:

Jesus used the imagery of these "gates of hell" to promise his church that nothing would ever prevail against the proclamation of the gospel.

No Gentile city would prevail. No Greek or Roman god worshiped in any of those cities would prevail.

No Roman Caesar would prevail. No persecution of the

church by Christ's enemies would prevail.

The disciples needed to hear that promise in this location because, soon after, they would find themselves at the forefront of the mission to spread the gospel. The disciples needed this encouragement as they headed to Jerusalem with their Lord for the last time.

Let us remember this promise in our lives also. The gates of hell have no chance against the faithful preaching of God's word throughout the world, or even against the personal witnessing we are called to perform in our individual earthly journey.

May this Gospel passage for today be a reminder for us of who Jesus is and what God has done for us through Jesus.

May this also be an encouragement to cling tightly to this Gospel - this Good News of a loving and gracious God - in the midst of everything around us that clamors for our devotion and to be central in our lives.

And finally, may this assurance that even the gates of hell will not prevail against this Good News embolden us to share this Good News and reflect the love and grace of God into the world around us.

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