

Matthew 16:13-20

The 12th Sunday After Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Sitting at the base of Mount Hermon, on the major Roman road between Tyre and Damascus, Caesarea Philippi has a commanding view of the valley that stretches 20 miles southward to the Sea of Galilee. The city marks the northern edge of Palestine and the northern edge of Jesus' ministry.

Early Greek settlers inscribed praise to their god Pan in the nearby caves, long before Jesus' birth. Herod the Great - the one who tried to kill Jesus as an infant - received the area from Caesar Augustus, and in turn dedicated a temple to him there. Some time later, during Jesus' time, the area passed to his son Herod Philip, who grew it into a city and named it after himself and Tiberius Caesar. Matthew's readers would have known it as a centre of Roman control, and the garrison of the Roman legion that destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD.

The site is both a celebration of the power of Gods and kings, and a reflection on the transitory nature of that power and the changing tides of history.

In the face of these changes, at the seat of Roman military power in the region, at a cultic site of a foreign god, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" In

other words, "What do people think God is up to?" They answer, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

The people are equating Jesus' ministry with that of his immediate predecessor, or one of the figures out of Israel's heroic past. Perhaps the people are unable to imagine, in this dark time of oppression and violence, that God is capable of doing a radically new thing and saving in new ways. Perhaps they are only able to imagine a return to the former status quo, however unlikely that hope seems to be.

I can't blame them, I suppose.

In the first months of the Coronavirus pandemic, Canadians were good at pulling together by staying apart. We avoided our friends, we worked from home, we limited ourselves to takeout food from restaurants, we went without haircuts and dental appointments and theoretically-elective surgeries. But Dr. Theresa Tam has recently warned that we can probably expect peaks and valleys of disease transmission through January 2022. Experts worry about 'pandemic fatigue' as Canadians push to return to long-postponed activities. Every week we ask ourselves, can we go back to our church buildings yet? Can we sing together, pray together, laugh and cry together? Can we gather for coffee time, sit in the familiar chairs, smell the familiar musty smells, see the familiar dents and marks on the walls that proclaim this place is lived in, that it's home?

Some churches have done this, but in most cases the experience is not what they hoped for. You can't touch, you can't hug, you can't share a pew, you can't come early or linger afterwards, you can't sing, you can't take Communion.

And now Dr. Tam is saying the Coronavirus is with us until 2022? That this is the new normal?

We have all wondered: how many people will drift away? How many will fall out of the habit of church attendance, find new communities of meaning, and leave our church family behind? How many churches will close? My friends and I were wondering, how many ministers will be laid off? How many will retire? How many people will want to train for and enter paid accountable ministry: preaching, leading music, nurturing youth and families?

Things will remain disordered for at least another year or two, and will likely never go back to exactly the way they were. Some things will be forever different. We stand in the midst of reminders of the way things were, surrounded by change, and ask ourselves: "What do we think God is up to?" Can God do a new thing?

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," answers Simon bar Jonah. This means, "You are the new saving act of God, promised in the scriptures of our people and in the traditions of our ancestors. You share in the essence and the authority of our God who is not dead and consigned to the past but alive and responsive today."

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!" Jesus replies. "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 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."

"*Blessed* are you." Not "Smart are you," "Wise are you," "A good student are you," but "*Blessed* are you": *fortunate* are you. For you have perceived this spiritual truth not through your own effort but through the gift of insight granted by God. This is not a mundane worldly fact but a revelation.

Next, "You are Peter [*Petros*, Rock, male] and on this rock [*petra*, rock, female] I will build my Church [*ekklesia*, assembly, female]." Notice how the grammatically female gender of the rock agrees with the female gender of the Church. Simon is a good guy and this is where he gets his nickname, Peter; but Jesus' foundational rock for his church will not be Peter. It will instead be Peter's divinely revealed insight: that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Church depends not on the strength and loyalty and skill and wisdom of flesh and blood—that is to say, of its members—but on the lifegiving truth of the Gospel: Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. God is like Jesus and God is alive and active. This is the beating heart of the Gospel, of the Church, of the world.

But that doesn't mean that we who worry about our church and world can log off of Zoom and go back to bed. Those who pursue righteousness still have a human role to play, for the divine revelation of Jesus' identity still came through Peter's human lips.

Jesus identifies him as "Simon son of Jonah." The revelation that Jesus is the Messiah is only significant because he understands the tradition of the covenant behind that word. And how does he know that? Because he is Simon son of Jonah. Because his father Jonah, and his mother, and his grandparents, raised him in the faith.

Recently I was in a conversation where someone claimed, "You can know Jesus without reading the Bible."

Can you?

What does it mean to *know Jesus*?

You can live an ethical life and you can have a sense of spirituality without knowing the Bible, yes. You can be Christ-like without knowing the Bible, yes. But what is your foundation when things get rough or when the pandemic drags on until 2022? What source of strength do you have beyond yourself? What is your rock?

As Jews and as Christians, the Bible is our family story. You can be part of your family but you can't understand who your family is without knowing your history; you can't be grounded in the struggles of the people who came before you without the Bible. You can't really know and respect and understand your parents without understanding

how their past experiences shaped them. You can't draw strength and inspiration from your ancestors without knowing about them.

You can't embody and really *get* the social justice commandments of life in the Promised Land without knowing that your ancestors were wanderers in the desert and slaves in Egypt. You can't understand the symbolism of the harvest—the significance of its richness, and the fact that you can eat the food you laboured to harvest—without knowing the history of wandering in the desert and slave labour.

You can't trust the promises of the future without knowing the fulfilled promises to your ancestors in the past.

The Church has to be belonging and identity and meaning and storytelling. The Church has to hold and transmit our memory. In a time where the only certainty is that the world is changing, the Church has to tell the story. *That* is what the Church needs to be and will be through 2022 and beyond.

Let's finish where we began, at Caesarea Philippi. The city sits near the base of Mt. Hermon, the highest point in Palestine. When I lived in Calgary, I could always orient myself by finding the Rocky Mountains to the West. Wherever a Jew goes in Palestine, they can lift up their head and find Mt. Hermon floating above the haze to the North.

Whatever changes down below in Caesarea Philippi, Mt. Hermon remains.

Whatever changes in our lives, in our churches, in our world, Jesus is still the Messiah and God is still alive and active. You can set your course by it. You can set your life by it. You can build your life on it.

Amen.

**Sources:**

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