

“A Vote of Confidence”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
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Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

We rejoin Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew today to discover that he has left behind his public events and is now focused on teaching his disciples. It’s as if the warm-up period of his ministry has ended, and he’s now going to get down to business. Of course, if we have been paying attention, we know Jesus has never been fooling around. His whole life he’s been serious about doing the Lord’s work, and the question he poses here is whether his followers are aware of just what he’s been up to. To find that out, he asks a seemingly roundabout question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

The answers that are offered in response are revealing. They tell us who was important to the people, what they might have believed, and, of course, whether they understood the significance of Jesus’ acts and what they represented.

Now first, let’s address the most surprising thing, at least to us moderns, that this passage suggests: people seem to have believed that figures from the past might somehow come back to life. Have no doubts: everybody in the Jewish world of Jesus’ time knew that Elijah and Jeremiah had passed from the scene centuries earlier, and even John the Baptist, a contemporary of Jesus, had been beheaded by Herod back in chapter 14 of Matthew’s Gospel.

More important is that no contemporary personalities were mentioned—no politicians, no rebels, no religious leaders, no teachers, nobody. All who were cited were figures from Israel’s past. Put another way, the people were looking backwards for their salvation, not into the future. They were guided by nostalgia, not hope.

Jesus, of course, is the antithesis of such a mindset. He doesn't dismiss the past, but he looks forward to God's new creation, to the day when God's promises to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are finally fulfilled. Jesus is about the future, as realized in the present. He wanted to know if others, including his followers, were with him. And so he had to have been pleased with Simon Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter seems to have answered for all of the disciples. They may not have known the full ramifications of the title they gave Jesus, but they knew that in him, God was keeping his promises to Israel. Of course, as we'll see, the Disciples, Peter included, grossly misunderstood what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. But as the old saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step, and Peter and his companions had to begin their voyage somewhere. Confessing Jesus as Messiah was as good a place to start as any. They were looking for a Messiah and believed Jesus was the one they sought. In him they placed their hopes and dreams. Peter's statement was essentially a vote of confidence in Jesus.

Jesus recognized Peter's vote of confidence in him with one of his own, renaming Simon and expressing his own hopes for the future, but also seeking to be clear about who had enabled Peter's recognition in the first place. This was a big deal, and it wasn't due to any careful observations or clever deductions on Simon's part. Instead, he was open to the workings of God's spirit, which enabled him to see just who Jesus was.

We know that when we are stuck in our ways, when we are accustomed to seeing things in a particular manner, our ability to envision new possibilities can be hampered. To offer just one famous example, a lot of people were convinced that manned flight in a heavier-than-air, powered craft was never going to happen, even after it had been proven to be theoretically possible. We, of course, know that was wrong. But sometimes taking that leap of imagination, envisaging the improbable, requires not only having faith but willfully setting aside all of one's preconceptions. This is what Peter did, to his eternal credit. Yes, he may have gotten a lot of the details wrong—like what kind of Messiah Jesus would be—but on the Big Question, he was right.

God may be the author of our faith, but we have to be receptive to his actions. And when we make room for God in our lives, we find that he does amazing and surprising things.

Consider our friend Peter, previously known as Simon, son of Jonah. In giving him a new name, Jesus was helping this Galilean fisherman set aside what had come before and strike off in a wholly new direction in his life. We take personal reinvention for granted today. Whether we seek to buff our images on Facebook, or dive into self-help books, or pick up stakes and move across the country to try out a new lifestyle or career, starting

over has long been a theme in America. Not so in the ancient world. People generally stayed in one place, both literally and figuratively, for their entire lives.

And so, we see just how big a deal it is that Peter was given a green light to do something new and remarkable with his life. Jesus in doing this first offers a blessing, or as one commentator noted, a beatitude: “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek in Spirit, blessed are you, Simon.” Jesus’ attention is both individual and communal. Here he focuses on the person—but look at what he expects Peter to do. Simon is not told he is blessed and will therefore catch lots of fish. No, he is blessed and so will be able to do work for Jesus.

Of course, being recruited to live a life in Christ is a big deal. It is today and was 2,000 years ago. The vocation of following Jesus should be life-changing. Any of us may be called to do this work. Not just those who are ordained, who have gone to seminary, or who work in a church building, but each and all of us who seek to follow the Way of Christ.

Now, something else needs to be said about Peter’s blessing here. This passage has given rise to lots of misconceptions. First, *Cephas*—this is not an adjective. It does not mean “Rocky” but “Rock.” If you are the kind to indulge in celebrity comparisons, do not imagine that Simon was some first-century underdog-turned-champion boxer like Rocky Balboa. Instead, you can think of Dwayne Johnson, known better as “The Rock.” Again, it’s easy to imagine the wrong things here. Peter, to the best of our knowledge, was not a telegenic, pro-wrestler-turned-media-phenomenon. But like Mr. Johnson, after a run at one career, Peter turned to another, and while he never signed a movie contract or hosted a TV show, he has made a tremendous difference in the lives of literally millions of people through heeding the word of God.

So just what did Jesus mean when he dubbed Simon a “rock”? I believe he was saying that Peter, for all his faults, for all his fearfulness, for all his unsteadiness, would ultimately be a person that Jesus could count on. And, as we know from the book of Acts, Jesus was right.

What Jesus was not saying here is that Peter was to be the first bishop of Rome and that all of his successors would inherit his office and have the sole ability to decide who did what and where. Now, let me be clear: this is not going to be an attack on the Catholic Church. While I believe their interpretation of Scripture in this instance is wrong, and I have Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others to back me up, there is a cautionary tale here for all Christians, regardless of denomination, about losing sight of what Jesus calls us to do. He never asked us to establish an ecclesiastical bureaucracy, but he did command us to take up the cross, to imitate him in leading lives of sacrificial service in the praise of the one true God. If we do this, then what Jesus told Peter will be true for us, too: good will prevail.

But what of the gates of hell, and the keys to the kingdom? Well, there is nothing here about “hell,” but there is mention of Hades, which was understood to be the equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol, inspired by the smoldering garbage pit outside the Jerusalem city walls. And “keys to the kingdom of heaven” is a great phrase, but there is no warrant for the idea that Peter stands at the entrance to heaven, deciding who may enter.

No, we are called by Jesus to be the Children of Light, and through our faithful living, grounded in our faith in God, we will triumph over darkness, and death will not have the last word—this is the heart of the Easter faith, the faith by which we live.

We see an example of this kind of living in the Exodus passage about baby Moses being set adrift, hopefully to find safety. His mother’s trust in God here is awe-inspiring, and we know it would be rewarded. After the child’s basket was drawn from the river, he was brought into Pharaoh’s home to live with the ruler’s daughter, who ultimately entrusted the boy to the care of a midwife, his birth mother—the one who had placed her trust in God. Talk about a plot twist!

I cannot honestly imagine what was going through her head but consider this: every male Hebrew child had been placed under a death sentence, and the agents of the state were enforcing this edict. It was under these awful circumstances that placing a child in a basket on a river seemed like the safer course of action! But I believe this was so for Moses’ mother because she believed that her God would somehow protect the child. That was a tremendous vote of confidence, wasn’t it?

But that’s what votes of confidence are: they are not bets on sure things. Yes, they may be reasoned and well considered, but they involve an element of risk, a roll of the dice, a hope and a prayer that things will work out. Now, I don’t mean to imply that a vote of confidence is a blind gamble. But it is something more than a simple assertion that all will be well. A vote of confidence, even when expressed in the direst of moments, is a conviction filled with hope.

And what else is the life of faith but a vote of confidence in the ways of the God who revealed himself in the burning bush to Moses, who led the people of Israel through the sea to the Promised Land, who came in the person of Jesus, and who remains present with us in the Holy Spirit?

We need to have faith, to show our confidence in God, if we are to live in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is here, in the world, at this time. The question is whether we are able to recognize it.

When we live our lives by placing our trust in politicians, celebrities, jobs, or anything else other than God, our sight is drawn away from God’s world. False hopes, no matter

how elaborate or seemingly justified, will never be realized. Moses' mother could have trusted in Pharaoh—but that would have led to death for her child. Jesus could have vested his mission in someone more qualified than Peter, but then Jesus' work would have been sidelined in favor of a different agenda.

Jesus works through imperfect people like Peter, like you and me. This is an exhilarating truth, but it is also one that comes with a challenge. Look at the passage again and see how it ends: after Jesus tells Peter of all he would do in Jesus' name, he orders the disciples to not tell anyone what he has just told them. Jesus does not explain why, he just tells. In a way, Jesus is asking Peter and the others once again to vote their confidence in their teacher, to trust that his ways are indeed the true ones, that in due time they will see how God's promises to his people are being fulfilled.

We know that God is faithful. But still, today, his ways can be mysterious, and we are being called to trust in that which we cannot see. Earlier I said that first-century Jews were looking to the past for their salvation. We might hear this statement and think, "What fools! Anybody should know it is not possible to live in the past!" But we would do well to look at ourselves, to see just how we might be falling into the same trap. We, too, must remember that Jesus is calling us to live in his future, to recognize that the promises God has made will be kept and are indeed being fulfilled in this time. All we need to do is look, to have faith, to give God our vote of confidence.