

“The Solid Rock”

Rev. Robert H. Wade

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Matthew 16:13-20

To fully grasp the significance of the interchange between Jesus and his disciples we are about to read, it is helpful to picture the natural terrain which served as this story’s backdrop. The Roman city Caesarea Philippi, was in the far northeastern part of Israel in the foothills of Mount Hermon and was home to one of the most striking rock formations in all of Israel. Picture a massive cliff covered with niches and nooks. These niches had been carved out by the ancients to hold their idols thus forming a worship center. This goes back to the 3rd century BC where they even offered human sacrifice at this location. You can see this imposing wall of rock/worship center by going to [YouTube](#) and clicking in *Caesarea Philippi—Peter’s Confession*. *Randall Niles* gives a short but compelling commentary on the significance of the following interaction taking place at Caesarea Philippi.

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. *“The Word of the Lord...”*

By now Jesus’ disciples had seen him feed the 5,000, walk on water, calm the storm, cure a Canaanite woman’s daughter and so much more. In addition to the healings and miracles, they heard him teaching about grace and the law, true worship, integrity and hypocrisy. Plus, they had witnessed Jesus boldly debate religious leaders revealing fresh, outside the box ideas.

All along the way Jesus was training his band of brothers. To that end, he was in the habit of giving pop quizzes to monitor how much they were comprehending. In the passage that immediately precedes our reading for today, Jesus warns the disciples to ***“beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*** But his warning flew right over their heads. They missed his point entirely. They thought Jesus was talking about literal bread! I can just hear Jesus saying, *Oey Vey*, ***“You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive?”*** (Matt. 16:5-11) *Will you ever get it? Oey, Vey!*

Now, as they enter Caesarea Philippi, very possibly standing at the base of the niche pocked cliff where hundreds of tiny gods had been worshiped, Jesus knows the time is ripe for another quiz. He makes it easy for his disciples and asks a non-threatening question, ***“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”*** What a relief! All they have to do is say what they’ve heard. Not much risk in that especially since everybody’s been talking about Jesus. So they jump right in..... “John the Baptist,” “Elijah,” “Jeremiah” and they shout out a few other prophets. It’s always easy to report the opinions of others. Now, feeling pretty good about themselves, they wait for Jesus to announce which one of them answered correctly. But that’s not where Jesus is going with this line of questioning. He doesn’t really care what others are saying about him but he cares greatly about what they believe about him. So Jesus asks the most important question he ever asked, ***“But who do you say that I am?”***

Standing below that cliff of a hundred gods where every conceivable world view, religion, thought system, and belief was worshiped, Jesus asks the most profound question, ***“Who do you say that I am?”*** It doesn’t matter what others believe. We are only accountable for ourselves. So again *the question*, ***“Who do you say that I am?”***

While Jesus’ disciples were quick to answer the question about what others were saying about him, now, challenged to give their personal opinion, I have a hunch there must have been a lengthy period of awkward silence. I can picture the band of brothers shuffling their feet, careful not to make eye contact with Jesus, hemming and hawing, waiting for someone else to speak lest they be embarrassed by giving the “wrong” answer.

Thank goodness for Peter! Right or wrong he is the always the first to jump in....leaving his fishing business to follow Jesus....getting out of the boat to walk on water....giving an opinion about building booths on the occasion of Jesus' transfiguration. Well, Peter does not disappoint and he is first to speak up, ***“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”***

Jesus' heart must have been wonderfully warmed! This is what he had been waiting for....a clear description of who he was. Not just a healer! Not just a miracle worker! Not just a great debater! Not just an insightful teacher! Those are all things Jesus *did* but Peter's confession went right to the core of *who Jesus is*. ***“You are the Messiah (Savior), the Son of the living God.”*** Standing below that rock formation of a hundred gods, Peter gets it right....you are more than a great moral leader....you are more than a brilliant teacher....you are more than an influential prophet....you are more than one god among many.....you are Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Yes, Peter gets it right and Jesus exuberantly responds, ***“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”*** But note that even as Jesus is thrilled that Peter gets it, he makes it clear that Peter did not come to this correct conclusion on his own. Jesus passed on the praise to God. Peter's discernment of Jesus' true identity and his confession of faith was a gift from God. God revealed the truth to Peter. It didn't come from Peter's wisdom or reasoning. Reason, flesh and blood as Jesus calls it, cannot bring us to a faith response to Jesus' true identity. Only revelation through God's Spirit can prompt one to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Faith is God's gift to us!

Yet Jesus kicks up his heels in gratitude and he promptly confirms Peter as the rock on which he will build the church. *What do you make of this?* As you know the church has debated the meaning of “the rock and the keys” for centuries. The traditional Roman Catholic position is that the church is built on the *rock* of the person of Peter. Emphasis is on the primacy of Peter who was the first bishop of Rome and, therefore, first in line of the papal succession. Peter's bones are believed to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica and much emphasis is placed on Christ's authority being passed from Pope to Pope.

We Protestants, on the other hand, have taken the view that the church is built on the *rock* of Peter's confession, "***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***" The emphasis is not on the person of Peter but upon Christ and our faith that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. I rather like the fact that this passage is a bit ambiguous. It can certainly be read in more ways than one.

As you look in the footnotes for the NRSV Bible, you will see that Jesus is making a play on words. He says, "***And I tell you, you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (Petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.***" According to Lawrence Richards in the Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, "*Petros* indicates, not the mountainous mass, but rather a fragment, a stone, from the larger mass *Petra*." (Page 537) I understand this passage to be saying that Peter (Petros) is a chip off the old block...that Peter, himself, is a piece of the rock. It's as if Peter and Peter's confession show us the way. Peter was the *first* to articulate the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This confession is the foundational confession parents make as they present their babies for baptism, it is the foundational confession confirmation students make when joining the church and, in fact, it is the foundational confession everyone makes to become members of the Church. It is Jesus who is the Rock but as Peter and you and I and all others confess Jesus as Lord and Savior we become a part of the Solid Rock.

It is on this relationship of the little chunks of rock (*Petros*) with the Solid Rock of Ages (*Petra*) that the Church is built. The Church is not built on flawless, intellectually superior or spiritually profound people. Just look at Peter. Here is a man who, shortly after being told that he was given the keys of the kingdom, insisted that Jesus not go to Jerusalem. To which Jesus told him, "***Get behind me Satan.***" (Matt. 16:23) Wow! From Saint to Satan in one fell swoop! Here is a man who made a brave promise to remain faithful to Jesus only to lose his courage and deny Jesus three times. I'm glad someone like Peter is in charge of heaven's gates because he will understand people like us who have the best of intentions but who don't always follow through as we say or even think we will.

If Peter and his confession is the rock upon which the church is built then there is hope for all of us. He is living proof that one does not have to have their act together in order to receive the keys to the kingdom and to participate in the building of that kingdom. Throughout the Bible we see that God uses stubborn, impetuous, wishy washy people like Peter to accomplish God's reconstruction work here on earth. None of us serve God without blemish and none of us have to become perfect before we can begin serving. We can count on this, as we serve God, even with the best intentions, we will *all* make mistakes. Nevertheless, we are still part of the Solid Rock!

I have no doubt that one of the reasons Peter endeared himself to Jesus is because he never gave up. He kept getting out of the boat. Yes, he sunk on occasion but he kept getting out of the boat. Peter's motivation is reflected in this morning's reading from Romans. ***“I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (whole being) as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** (Romans 12:1,2)

It's not the words of our confession that is most important. It is the offer of our whole being in faith, hope and love to the One who is our Solid Rock that makes all the difference in the world. Peter got the ball rolling with his great confession and his life lived by faith. Peter is a wonderful model for us to follow.

And don't forget, we are Peter's kin, and whether we rise or whether we fall, whether we give the right answer or whether we give the wrong one, whether we succeed or whether we fail, we too are chips off the old block, pieces of the Solid Rock. It all begins with the same confession uttered by Peter long ago, Jesus ***“you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!”*** From that confession we know we are standing on the Solid Rock! To him be the glory now and forevermore! (Prayer)

Amen

