

“The Town Where It Happened”

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”

Several years ago, I stopped at a rest area on the New York State Thruway. As I was walking toward the main building, I noticed a large sign that announced “History Happened Here.” At first, I thought that of course history happened there, because history happens *everywhere*. On closer inspection, I discovered that the sign was referring to a significant historical event involving the building of the Erie Canal, which played a key role in the expansion of commerce into the heartland of America. While any place has seen history happen on its soil, there are places where significant historical events are commemorated in order to help us understand how past events have shaped our present realities. In Charlottetown, PEI one can visit Confederation House, where a new nation known as Canada was established. During my years in Niagara Falls, we were surrounded by sites commemorating key battles from the War of 1812. When I attended seminary in Philadelphia, I would often visit sites that played a critical role in the birth of the United States of America, including Independence Hall and Constitution Hall. One of our favorite sites near my hometown was Washington Rock, an overlook used by General George Washington during the American Revolution. Any community can rightfully claim that “history happened here,” but it is these important sites that changed the course of history that have a special place in the lives of peoples and nations.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Matthew reports that Jesus “*came into the district of Caesarea Philippi*” after yet another conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees. At first, this may appear to be merely a detail about Jesus’ travel itinerary; but a closer inspection reveals that there is an important reason why Jesus chooses this location to ask his disciples “*who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” (16:13). Caesarea Philippi was approximately 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and was named in honor of Tiberias Caesar and Philip, son of Herod the Great. It was once the site of a cultic center that worshiped the Canaanite god Baal, then in Hellenistic times it became known as Paneas because the Greek god Pan had been worshiped at a famous grotto and spring there. Herod the Great built a temple in this city in honor of Caesar Augustus, and his son Philip later included his own name in this place of pagan worship. Matthew sets the scene of Jesus’ question in the shadow of the Caesar temple, where the Roman destroyers of Jerusalem celebrated their victory in AD 70. Matthew appears to be informing his readers that it was not an accident that Jesus chose Caesarea Philippi as the place where his confession as the Jewish Messiah will happen; the confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah will separate the new community of faith he is forming from those who will oppose and reject it as they worship other gods.

Jesus is well aware of the speculation that is circulating in the wake of his teachings and miracles, and he is also aware that his disciples have heard many things being said about him; so it is in this place where many gods have been worshiped that Jesus asks his disciples “*who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” (16:13) using a title that has its origins in the book of Daniel:

- “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped

him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” – Daniel 7:13-14, NIV.

The disciples’ reply indicates that the populace has high opinions of Jesus’ identity: “*Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*” (16:14). The common denominator of all those named is not only that they were prophets, but that they also belong to the transcendent sphere of those who have been exalted because of their faithfulness even in the face of danger and martyrdom. They place Jesus in the company of prophets who have been raised from the dead and, in the words of our Creed, are “*seated at the right hand of the Father.*”

Jesus’ first question invites the disciples to report on what they have heard, but his second question is directed at them: “*But who do you say that I am?*” (16:15). They have been witnesses to his teaching and miracles; they have heard the crowds react with amazement at his teaching “*for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*” (7:29). They have seen the crowds react to his healing miracles by being “*filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.*” (9:8). When Jesus calmed the storm that threatened their lives, “*those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*” (14:33). Now, in this place where generations of people have chosen to worship various gods, the disciples are challenged to confess who they believe Jesus to be; “*Jesus puts them on the spot and calls for a direct answer to the question.*” (Curtis Mitch & Edward Sri).

Simon Peter answers on behalf of the group, declaring that “*you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” (16:16). “Messiah” (“anointed one”) is a term that was applied to priests and kings of Israel, both of whom were installed in office by a rite of anointing (“*[Moses] poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him, to consecrate him.*” – Leviticus 8:12). The hope of a coming messiah was primarily rooted in the Lord’s covenant with David, where the Lord pledged to establish the kingdom of David for all time (“*You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations.*” – Psalm 89:3-4). Along with the everlasting throne, David’s heirs are promised a unique filial relationship with the Lord as an adopted “son” (“*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*” – 2 Samuel 7:14). Hope for the fulfillment of the Davidic monarchy after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC was kept alive by the prophets, who envisioned the coming of a new David, a royal messiah from David’s descendants:

- “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots, The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.” – Isaiah 11:1-3a.
- “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” – Jeremiah 23:5-6.
- “On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this.” – Amos 9:11-12.

Simon Peter, speaking on behalf of all the disciples, declares that the messianic hope that was flourishing in first-century Palestine has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, who he also confesses as “*son of the living*

God,” which is a matter of revelation, echoing the heavenly voice that had identified Jesus at both his Baptism and Transfiguration:

- “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” – 3:17.
- “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” – 17:5.

Simon Peter proclaims that Jesus is not only the Son of God but the Son of the *living God*, contrasting Jesus with the idolatrous associations of this locale. The confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God implies a rejection of allegiance to any and all other gods, including those who had been worshiped in this place. Jesus invites his followers to turn their backs on gods who would seek their devotion so that they might turn toward him as the true source of light and life.

In contrast to Mark’s account of the confession of Simon Peter where Jesus “*sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him*” (Mark 8:30), Jesus reacts to this confession by profusely praising his disciple: “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*” (16:17). Peter is blessed not because of a personal attainment or insight he has achieved on his own; knowledge of Jesus’ saving role is by divine revelation – a gift, not an attainment.

- “That truth is significant because it means (among other things) that everything the disciples have experienced with Jesus, everything they have learned from this Messiah through their limited senses of sight, sound, taste, and touch, is not simply knowledge or experience revealed through ‘flesh and blood.’ It is, in fact, a revelation from God.” – Audrey West.

Jesus continues his response to this confession of faith by declaring to his disciple that “*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*” (16:18). While the name “Peter” is quite common in modern society (it’s my middle name!) there are no documented instances of anyone being named “Peter” in Aramaic or Greek societies prior to Simon. The word *petros* literally means “rock” or “stone,” and in bestowing this name on Simon Jesus is declaring that he will be the foundation rock on which Jesus will build his new community, the “church” (*ekklesia*, “assembly), the gathering of those who share in the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus promises that the foundation he is establishing is so strong that even the “*gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*” Isaiah quotes King Hezekiah’s declaration that “*I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years*” (Isaiah 38:10), and the psalmist cries out “*be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death.*” (Psalm 9:13). Although the church will be under attack by the powers of evil, it will never be vanquished because it is founded on the Rock. “*The church does not escape from the power of Hades but participates in the struggle between the two kingdoms with the sure promise that the opposing kingdom symbolized by the power of death will never prevail.*” (M. Eugene Boring).

Jesus concludes his pronouncement to Simon Peter by declaring that “*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.*” (16:19). The “keeper of the keys” is the one who has authority within the house as administrator and teacher (“*I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.*” – Isaiah 22:22). Peter’s role as holder of the keys will be fulfilled as chief teacher of the church, in contrast to teachers of the Law who “*have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering*” (Luke 11:52). The

language of binding and loosing is rabbinic terminology for authoritative teaching, declaring what is permitted and what is not permitted according to the Torah. As Jesus “summoned the twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness” (10:1), here he gives the primary disciple the authority to teach in his name. This teaching office will be seen on the day of Pentecost, when Peter proclaims to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem that “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). It is this office of the keys that will offer liberation from the bondage of sin, death and the power of the devil which Christ obtained for us “not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death” (*Small Catechism*). The mission and ministry of the Church which is the body of Christ is rooted in the confession of faith that all Christians share with Peter, the “cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (1 Peter 2:6).

- “The essential point, though, is that the confession of Jesus as resurrected, as living with God’s own life, and as ruling as Lord of the church and world is what distinguishes the Christian view of Jesus from every other view. For everyone else, Jesus is another dead man; for Christians, he is the Living One. This confession is implicit in the very existence of a church gathered in Jesus’ name, in its celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in its healing in the name of Jesus, in its struggle against evil for the little ones with whom Jesus identifies himself.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

Jesus could have asked his disciples “*who do you say that I am*” at any time and in any place, but he purposely chooses Caesarea Philippi where so many others have chosen to worship and trust in other gods. In confession that Jesus is “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*,” Peter and the church that gathers upon the Rock of this faith proclaims both in whom it believes and whom it rejects. When we confess our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at the same time we renounce allegiance to any and all other gods and forces who would seek to draw us from God and demand our devotion:

- “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
- “Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
- “Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?” (ELW Holy Baptism)

Standing in the midst of temples and shrines devoted to the worship of other gods, the church that is built on the Rock confess what every generation of Christians proclaim: “*On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.*” This solid foundation of our faith is what continues to give us hope even in these uncertain and frightening times. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt all aspects of our lives, even as we live in a time in which the future is unknown, even as we wonder if we will ever get back to “normal” or even what “normal” may look like, we live in the comfort of a sure and certain hope that only faith in the good news of Jesus Christ can provide, confidence that no other gods that may surround us can offer.

- “The task of the church is to hope in a way that is grounded in the good faithful resolve of God ... to be *witnesses to the abiding hesed (tenacious solidarity) of God that persists amid pestilence ...* Faith is indeed ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (Heb. 11:1). That faith does not yield to death because it knows in the deepest ways that the goodness of God will not fold in the face of the threat of death.” – Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*.

While the places where we gather at God’s people may not be considered historic by future generations, the faith that we continue to proclaim as God’s people will have historic consequences as we seek to

remain steadfast in hope and love even in this time of dark uncertainty. As Peter proclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the shadow of the temples of other gods, we proclaim in a world filled with forces that would seek our allegiance that it is only the living Son of God who can offer us that which the world cannot offer: *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine with ten thousand beside!"* (ELW Hymn 733).

Amen.