

“On This Rock”

“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Earlier this summer, as construction workers began excavating the site that now cradles our new building they discovered a number of interesting things. An abandoned well was uncovered. They also unearthed the remains of the old parsonage foundation and, as the hole grew deeper, a few other remnants from the past made their way to the surface. But the most impressive find in the excavation process was a beautiful, massive, peach-colored boulder that now sits like an anchor in the west side garden.

Before you leave today, I encourage you to go over and check out that rock and, if you’re bold enough, give it a good shove. I have no idea what that rock weighs, but I guarantee that you could push on that rock all day and it’s not going anywhere. This week, as I prepared my sermon, I couldn’t stop thinking about our new artifact and its connection to today’s theme. If you pay attention today, you’ll find “rock” language all over the place. It’s mentioned in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, it shows up in our hymns, it provides imagery for our prayers and, most notably, it holds a very prominent place in today’s Gospel reading as Jesus talks specifically about the “rock” on which He will build His church.

The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery tells us that, “In the ancient world, where explosives and powerful drills were unknown, rock...was a ready image of impervious security” (732-33). And throughout the Bible we find rocks used to communicate the awesome power, provision and protection that God gave His people. In Exodus, God brought water from a rock to sustain His people in the desert (Exodus 17). In Deuteronomy, as Moses bid farewell to Israel he called God “the Rock” whose “work is perfect” and “ways are just” (Deuteronomy 32:4). In Scripture, rocks were used as altars on which to sacrifice and foundations on which to build. In the Psalms, David refers to the Lord as his “rock and redeemer” (Psalm 19:14) and Isaiah calls God “the rock of refuge” (Isaiah 17:10). Go outside today, pound and push on our rock and you will begin to understand why this object of power and permanence is used throughout the Bible as a way to describe God. And that’s what makes Jesus words in today’s reading so puzzling.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is alone with His disciples and He has just completed one of the most amazing and exhausting stretches in His earthly ministry. In chapter 14, after being told of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, He healed the masses, then He fed “five thousand,” next He walked on water and then He healed some more. In chapter 15, He confronts and offends the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, He retreats to a pagan region where He drives a demon from the daughter of a gentile woman; then He heads back to Galilee where is once again met by great crowds who bring the crippled, the lame, the blind, the mute, “and many others” and Jesus heals them all. He then feeds another cast of thousands, this time with seven loaves instead of five; He once again takes on the church leaders and finally, after all of this extraordinary activity, Jesus and the disciples retreat to the north side of the Sea of Galilee. They are finally alone and then the disciples realize they forgot to bring along any food. In verse seven, Matthew tells us that as they are talking anxiously with each about their lack of bread, Jesus interrupts and says, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?” (Matthew 16:9-10).

After everything they seen...the miracles of healing...the walking on the water...the food from out of nowhere that satisfied thousands...after all they had witnessed, they finally get away with Jesus and they are worried that they aren’t going to get supper?!? Are you kidding me? These disciples were eyewitnesses to some of the most incredible and miraculous events in the history of the world and they still don’t get it! This is an important thing to understand as we look at today text because, you see, at this point in their lives these disciples are clueless. These are not heroes of faith. These are not bold and courageous men of God. These men are broken, petty, scared and hungry followers who lack the simple faith of a child and this is exactly the state these disciples are in as today’s reading begins.

It’s to these disciples that Jesus speaks when asks, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And this was a question the disciples had no problem answering. The crowds that followed Jesus throughout the countryside must have had great debates about who this miracle worker really was and the disciples had, no doubt, heard their murmurings. So they quickly answer Jesus, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14). And then Jesus asks a question that completely turns the tables on the Twelve: “But what about you? Who do you say that I am” (Matthew 16:15).

Now, the Bible doesn't give us any stage directions but, as this scene unfolded, I'll bet there was a huge and heavy silence following Jesus' question. The disciples had witnessed His divine power, they had certainly entertained their own secret thoughts about who Jesus really was, but now, when Jesus turns to them directly and puts them on the spot, their eyes must have fallen to the ground with uncertainty and fear as they were asked the ultimate question, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" And then, in a bold stroke that split the silence like an axe Peter spoke: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

As we consider this text and the great confession it contains, the temptation here is to celebrate Peter; to hold him up as a spiritual giant and a role model for us all to follow. But remember, Peter was a mess! He sank in the waves when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he worried with the others about where they would get their next meal and later, when he was faced with questions about his loyalty to Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter swore up and down that he never even "knew the man." This was no model of faith. This was no rock-solid believer. And yet, his confession was spot on. How can that *be*? It's because this life-saving, life-changing, life-giving confession of faith was not from Peter's good heart or keen insight or strong will. This confession was the work of God!

In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed Martin Luther wrote, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." And Jesus affirms this truth with His response to Peter in verse 17. He doesn't say, "Way to go Pete!" or "You really know your stuff Simon!" And Jesus doesn't tell the rest of the disciples that they need to be more *like* Peter. No! Instead Jesus tells Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

Peter was blessed, but not because of anything he had done. Peter was blessed because to him *God had revealed Christ!* Peter had made no contribution to this process. Instead, faith in Christ and the power to confess it had been given to Peter as a gift. In I Corinthians Paul writes "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:3) and in this great confession from Peter the Father, through the Spirit, had planted faith in Peter's heart and Peter could do nothing else but confess it!

But what about when Jesus says to Simon, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church."? Isn't He giving Peter credit for this bold faith? *Absolutely not!* And here the original language is very helpful. In the Greek text, Jesus' words actually read something like this: "You are *Petros* and on this *petra* I will build my church." Now, when you hear the Greek, it's clear that the new name given to Simon, *Petros*, is actually derived, or taken, from *petra*, the word for rock, not the other way around. Like the word American is taken from America, or Christian comes from Christ, Jesus here is telling Simon that he and his faith are directly derived from the rock who is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In our Old Testament lesson Isaiah wrote, "Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn" (Isaiah 51:1) and this is exactly what Jesus is saying to Simon. You are a stone cut from the ultimate rock and without the *petra* there is no *Petros!*

So why is this all so important? What meaning does this text have for us in the here and now? My brothers and sisters, today I am here to tell you that for us, these words of Jesus mean *everything* because, you see, there are plenty of times when you and I are no models of faith. In fact, for the vast majority of our lives we would not consider ourselves rock-solid believers and, truth be told, our lives are riddled with doubts and shrouded in moral failings. We not the kind of people on which you would build anything let alone the church...and yet to us, Christ has been revealed.

You see, God does it all! Your faith, and the confession of your faith, rest solely on God! In your baptism, the Father, through the Spirit, revealed Christ to you in an intimate and personal way that surpasses understanding, and, as Jesus said to Peter, today He says to you, "Because I have revealed myself to you, YOU ARE BLESSED!" And today, in hearing the Gospel and eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness your sins, you are blessed! And no matter how solid or shaky you may feel today, and no matter how shamefully you have failed to live the Christian life, our Rock, Jesus Christ has died for you and your sins are forgiven. You are right with God and you know what? He promises that heaven will be full of once miserable, now forgiven sinners just like you!

Lutheran theologian Rod Rosenbladt once said, "Christianity is not so much about what is in your heart, but about what is in God's heart!" Don't look to yourself for salvation. Look to Christ. In Christ we see the heart of God and, "upon this rock" Jesus told Peter, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it!" Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Today, you are blessed because the Father in heaven has revealed this gift to you. Rejoice in Rock of our salvation! Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold