

“Built on the Rock”

“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

Rocks play a prominent role in the Bible. In Exodus, God brought water from a rock to sustain His people in the wilderness (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 the Psalms, David referred to the Lord as his “rock and redeemer” (Psalm 19:14), and Isaiah called God “the rock of refuge” (Isaiah 17:10). In Scripture, rocks were used as altars on which to sacrifice and foundations on which to build, and when you think of the permanence and power rocks convey, you can understand why this image is used throughout the Bible to describe God. And that’s what makes Jesus’ words in today’s reading so puzzling.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus was alone with His disciples after just completing an intense period of ministry. After all of this activity, Matthew shows Jesus and His disciples retreating to the north side of the Sea of Galilee for a measure of solitude and rest, and it’s on this getaway that the disciples realize they didn’t bring food for the trip. In verse seven, they are anxiously discussing their lack of lunch when Jesus interrupts and says to them, “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’d seen – the miracles of healing, Jesus walking on the water, food from out of nowhere that satisfied thousands. After all this, they finally get away with Jesus, and they are worried that they aren’t going to get supper. It’s laughable. These disciples had been eyewitnesses to some of the most incredible events in the history of the world, and they still didn’t get it! These men are no heroes of faith. These are not bold and courageous men of God. These disciples were broken, petty, scared, and hungry followers who lacked the simple faith of a child, and these are the men Jesus speaks to when He 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 must have had great debates about the identity of this miracle worker, and the disciples had, no doubt, heard their murmurings. So, they quickly replied, “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).

There must have been a heavy silence following this question from Jesus. These men 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 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, Peter spoke: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

As we consider this text and the great confession of faith it contains, the temptation here is to focus on Peter; to hold him up as a spiritual giant and a role model to follow; but don’t forget it was Peter who sank in the waves when he took his eyes off of Jesus, and you can bet Peter 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, what he said about Jesus 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, keen insight, or strong will. This confession was entirely the work of God!

In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' 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 applaud Peter for his knowledge or courage, 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...For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

Peter was blessed, but not because of anything he had done. Peter was blessed because to him God had revealed the 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!

This brings us to the heart of today's text. Jesus says to Simon, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."? It sounds like He's giving Peter credit for his audacious faith, but nothing could be further from the truth, and here, the original language is helpful. In the Greek text, Jesus' words read something like this: "You are Petros, and on this petra I will build my church." One of the bishops of the early church (Isidore of Seville) taught that the new name given to Simon, Petros, is actually derived from petra, the word for rock, not the other way around. Similar to the way 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 and 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!

And this understanding is incredibly important to us because, you see, there are plenty of times when you and I are not models of faith. In fact, for the vast majority of our lives, we would not consider ourselves a rock-solid anything. Truth be told, our lives are riddled with doubts and shrouded in moral failings. We are not the kind of people on whom 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 also 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 of your sins, *you are blessed!* And no matter how solid or shaky you may feel today, and no matter how shamefully you have failed as a Christian, your 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 filled with once-forsaken, now forgiven sinners...just like Peter...and just like you!

Christianity is not about what is in your heart – it's about what's in God's heart! To put it another way, we don't look to ourselves for salvation; we 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!" Today, you are blessed because the Father in heaven has revealed this gift to you and you can rejoice in the Rock of your salvation. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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