

“You Are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”

Matthew 16:13-20

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:13-20 NIV)

In the name of Jesus, the Christ, God's Son, and our Lord, dear friends:

“Who do people say I am?” It was an all-important question Jesus posed to his disciples. The destiny of people depends on their answer. The disciples answered, “Some say you're John the Baptist,” as King Herod superstitiously thought when he heard about Jesus' miracles after he had beheaded John: “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in Jesus” (Matt. 14:1). Others thought he was Elijah, or one of the prophets like Jeremiah from long ago, risen back to life. They recognized Jesus spoke with authority.

Today people answer that question in various ways. Some skeptics hold that he's mostly a myth, a teacher whose followers embellished his deeds and made up stories about him. Others like the Muslims grant that he was a prophet, but just one of many such prophets whom God sent. The Mormons teach that Jesus was a man who worked his way up to becoming a god. Some just say he's a fine religious teacher and a wonderful example for us.

“But what about you?” Jesus asks disciples, and us today. “Who do you say I am?” May we always answer as Simon Peter did: **“You Are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

First, let's unpack this confession that Peter made. “You are the Messiah.” Some translations say, “You are the Christ.” Both are the same. The Greek word “Christ” is the translation for the Hebrew “Messiah,” both of which mean “Anointed One.” It was foretold in the Bible that the Lord's servant, who would come to redeem his people, would be anointed with the Holy Spirit. Jesus was anointed by God the Father himself with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, at the age of 30, as the Messiah spoke in Isaiah 61:1: “The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” This was the Christ's office as a prophet, proclaiming good news from God. But more than that, “He has sent me...to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” The Messiah was anointed to be a High Priest, offering up himself as a sacrifice for sin, to release us who are imprisoned in sin. And he is our King, to rescue us from the devil and take us to his heavenly kingdom. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, our Prophet, Priest and King!

Jesus, the Son of Man, is also the “Son of the Living God.” At Jesus' baptism, a voice spoke from heaven: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” It was the voice of the living God, the Father! And he identified Jesus as his one-and-only Son. With Peter we too confess that Jesus is the Son, begotten of the Father from before all worlds, that he is “very God of very God,” begotten, not made, and became the Son of Man when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. This is what we believe, confess and teach today: Jesus is true God and also true man in one person.

But how did Peter come to know this? Jesus told Peter: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” Flesh and blood, a mortal human being could not come up with that statement on their own. God revealed it to Peter, through the divine teachings that Peter had been hearing from Jesus.

This confession about Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” does not come about by our so-called “free will” or our decision to accept Christ. The apostle Paul had it right when he wrote, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). We sinful human beings do not have the power to believe and confess Jesus as Lord. But the Holy Spirit worked that miracle in our hearts. The Holy Spirit doesn’t come to us directly, out of the blue, but through what we call means of grace, the gospel in God’s Word and the sacraments. Just as it happened with Peter, when we hear the inspired gospel message about Jesus, the Holy Spirit sparks faith, causing us to say and believe, “Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”

So keep listening to the Word, the Bible whose words are inspired by the Holy Spirit. For this Word is God’s own revelation that leads to our confession of Christ. And Jesus goes on to tell us what makes this revelation so vital: It is a revelation on which Christ builds his Church.

After Peter’s confession of faith, Jesus did a play on words with the name Peter. “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Jesus had given Simon, son of Jonah, the nickname “Peter,” which means “Rock.” But we shouldn’t think that Jesus was saying that he was building his church on Peter himself, as some churches mistakenly think. Peter had a rock-like statement about Jesus here, but he wasn’t always rock-like. Later that day, Jesus would rebuke him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me” (Mt. 16:23), for Peter was insisting that Jesus should not have to suffer and get killed. No, the “rock” on which Christ builds his Church was on the revelation that led to Peter’s confession and ours: The Word of God. That’s what Paul wrote (Ephesians 2:19,20): “Consequently, you are...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” The apostles wrote the New Testament, the prophets wrote the Old Testament, by inspiration from the Holy Spirit. The inspired Bible is the rock on which Christ builds his Church.

The building of the church includes “keys.” Jesus told Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The keys are the authority given by Christ to “bind,” that is, to retain sin or refuse to forgive the unrepentant sinner, and to “loose,” that is, to forgive the repentant sinner. Jesus was saying to Peter, “This awesome authority is yours, because of your faith, your confession about me!” But he wasn’t giving the keys just to Peter. Two chapters later in Matthew we read of Jesus giving the keys to all the disciples. The keys, in fact, are given to the Church at large. Still today, pastors and parishioners use the keys to announce God’s judgment on an unrepentant member, and forgiveness to comfort a member who’s sorry about their sins.

“Built on the Rock the Church Shall Stand,” as we sing in a familiar hymn. By God’s grace Jesus builds us into his church that rests on the rock of the gospel message: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus promises that not even the gates of Hades, or hell, will overcome this church. Yes, there are many strong winds and storms blowing against Jesus’ church: The winds of culture change and immorality; the storms of false belief and materialism; the hurricanes and tornadoes of the devil and mockery of God. Make your stand on the Rock, and you will not be blown over!

Now, Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah. The time to reveal this truth to others would not happen until Jesus would finish his work as the Messiah on earth, after he died, rose, and went to heaven. But we today can tell others. Let’s make our confession openly, so that others too can say of Jesus: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” Amen.