

Matthew 16.13-20  
August 23, 2026, Pentecost + 13

Rev. Pauline Farrington  
Trinity, North Bethesda

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And 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. And 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. 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." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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The past three weeks we've been  
     finding focus  
         in a world that stands  
             in stark contrast to the ways of Christ.  
 Jesus seems, intentionally,  
     to set up that contrast  
         in this first part of a two part story  
             (we'll explore part two next week).  
 Like last week's story set in  
     in the region of Tyre and Sidon,  
         this week's geography  
             tells a big part of the story.

The location is Caesarea Philippi,  
     about 30 miles north  
         of the Sea of Galilee.  
 Jesus has led his disciples  
     far away from their  
         usual base of operation.  
 This is a place that,  
     through the centuries,  
         was a pagan center for worship.  
             It has niches carved into a tall rock face  
                 to hold shrines and statues of the gods.  
 The grotto of the Hellenistic god, Pan, is there.  
     It's a big cave with  
         a natural pit  
             that drops deep down  
                 to a spring running underneath.

Human sacrifice happened there.  
 It's called the gate to the underworld.  
 The gates of Hades.

During Herod the Great's rule,  
 he built a temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus,  
 the first Emperor of Rome, who  
 called himself the "son of god."  
 The temple of Augustus was  
 devoted to the worship of the emperor,  
 and it was positioned right in front of  
 the opening to Pan's cave —  
 in a play of oneupmanship.

So here is Jesus, with his disciples,  
 towered over by a huge rock face  
 studded with stone, pagan gods,  
 in the shadow of the  
 Caesar-son-of-god temple,  
 in front of the gates of Hades  
 This is the place Jesus brought them  
 to ask them, "*Who do people say;  
 who do you say  
 that I am?*"

Up to this point in the gospel,  
 the disciples have witnessed  
 Jesus' compassion for the world.  
 They've experienced him  
 teaching and debating,  
 healing and feeding,  
 and some crazy things  
 like walking on a stormy sea.  
 But they haven't seen anything from him  
 that would point to what  
 people expect of Messiah.  
 He hasn't planned or set up  
 a messiah-like, militant overthrow  
 of the reigning oppressor.  
 He hasn't even hinted at that.

Yet Peter, in a stroke of clarity and focus,  
 guided not by his own notions  
 or by any human imagination

but by God's spirit,  
     speaks a truth  
         that no stone gods can overshadow.  
 "You're Messiah, Son of the Living God."  
 A dangerous statement to be made aloud  
 in front of the temple of Augustus,  
     in a very Roman city.  
 But Peter has a vision of what's real.  
     It's a spiritual knowledge that comes  
         from the core of his being,  
             from that God-particle  
                 that's inside each of us.  
     It's a statement of a faith that comes  
         as a gift from God  
             in a moment of  
                 presence and attention  
                     to the divine Presence.  
 And *this* is the rock on which the church is built —  
     this foundation of spiritual knowing.  
 Peter gets to wear the name Rock,  
     based on this moment of  
         divinely-inspired clarity and conviction.  
 The church has made  
     much of his being identified that way,  
         with the apostolic succession  
             propping up the patriarchy.  
 But I don't really think Peter **is** the rock.

The church's foundational rock is  
     this spiritual knowing — even when  
         we don't even understand  
             what it is that we know.  
*That* is the key to the kingdom of heaven.  
     And all the gates of Hades —  
         all those stone idols of worship  
             that distract us from every direction —  
                 can not stop the church  
                     that's built on  
                         this rock of faith.

And this kingdom of heaven —  
     it's not an eternal place that's removed  
         from our everyday life.

It's an eternity of a spiritual knowledge  
 of the nearness and presence of God —  
 including this day.

It's loosing earth and heaven  
 from our human tendency toward dualism  
 and separation and  
 binding earth and heaven  
 as one in cords of love.

It's all part of following Jesus,  
 the compassionate messiah —  
 son of the *living* God.

But ssshhhh! Don't tell anyone!

No one really understands  
 what his messiahship is about.

It's not about confronting Caesar  
 with Caesar-like, opposition.

It's about reversing  
 Caesar's way of arrogance and  
 violence and oppression.

Opposing Caesar is about  
 bringing to life Caesar's opposite —  
 a way of humility,  
 of peace and justice,  
 of restoration and grace.

It's about building  
 a world guided by compassion  
 even in the shadows of  
 the Caesars and imperial temples,  
 monuments and stone gods,  
 that surround us and  
 crowd in for our attention.

Too often our focus is grabbed by  
 the god-like figures of our age.

We succumb to the Caesar-like influences  
 that divide and separate us,  
 and we think the only way to survive  
 is to fight.

Our focus is found in Jesus  
 and all that he teaches about  
 living a life of following him.

*"Who do people say that I am?  
 Who do you say that I am?"*

Today, in the shadow of all the false gods  
humanity creates (and we go after) —  
today is a good time, again,  
to compare and contrast,  
to consider  
who Messiah really is.

We are given the keys  
of the kingdom of heaven.  
We are trusted with discerning  
and following Christ in our age.  
In a world where stone gods  
and monuments  
are more important than  
sick or hungry people  
we are trusted with  
a vision of what's *real*.  
We have access to that spiritual knowledge  
of Messiah, son of the living God —  
knowledge that comes  
from the core of our being,  
from that God-particle  
inside each of us.  
And this is the rock on which Jesus continues  
to build his church —  
a church not of stones  
but of hearts and minds  
and hands.

We are charged with the  
care and feeding of humanity  
even while the stones of empire  
continue to be built all around us.  
This rock that has sustained the church,  
from that day to this,  
will continue to sustain us.  
And the gates of Hades  
will no prevail against it.