

'Who Are You in Christ? A Rock or a Stumbling Block?' based on Matthew 16:12-27, Philippians 2:3-5
Delivered on Sunday, August 30, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

This text reminds me of an old story of the little girl in her yard. There was a little stream behind her parents' house and she just loved jumping in it, chasing frogs, picking flowers and playing in the mud – much like Josephine. Well, mom and dad got sick of all the laundry and told her not to play in it. But the next day, she got in it again and was covered in mud.

Hoping to convince her to stop, they told her that it is Satan is tempting her to jump in the stream. They said, 'When you get that urge to disobey us and jump in, you should say, "Get behind me Satan!" Figuring that the idea of the devil being involved in this decision would scare her, the parents walked away confident that their daughter would stay dry. Not 20 minutes later though, the girl came back covered in mud. 'What happened?' the parents asked. The little girl said, 'I said 'Satan get behind me! but then he pushed me in!'

Preaching any biblical text that involves Satan is often a challenge in our modern era. I've found that in most conversations there are two prevailing views of this shadowy figure. There is a modern sense he doesn't really exist – that Satan only 'represents' evil. The second view tends to embody him as the almost all-powerful adversary of God, even blaming Satan, as the little girl did, for many of our sins.

In the first, I think of the line from the movie, "The Usual Suspects," which is, 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled, was convincing the world he doesn't exist.' But for both together, I think of C.S. Lewis in his preface to the classic book, 'The Screwtape Letters.' The great Christian author says these opposite views of Satan are both wrong. To reject the existence of demons or to give them power and have unhealthy interest in them, are both errors which only please a real Satan and demonic forces.

I'm in the middle with Lewis, where I think the bible tells of a real shadowy figure or figures at work, but any such being is not an excuse for our sin, since their only powers are sin and death, and by my faith, I believe that sin and death were defeated on the cross, and they were proven powerless by resurrection of Jesus.

However, this doesn't mean that we won't die or that we will not fall for Satan's lies and sin. The gospel truth is that even though we are sinners, God has always been faithful to us, desiring to be with us, even becoming a human being just like you and me. It is by Jesus that we know the true character of God, indeed, 'God with us.' It is by His life, death and resurrection that Jesus has called us, renewed us to be temples for the Holy Spirit to pour love into us. We are empowered to pour that love out in love for God and our neighbor, because by faith we know that we are forgiven and death is not the end. The Christian becomes a part of the work God is doing in the world, without fear for what we might lose, even life, but confidence, in what we will gain by reconciling all things in Christ, and spreading this good news for all to join us.

Even though we know this, sadly, we still turn from God when tempted by the world around us. The truth is that sin and death still work hand-in-hand with false gods to tempt us. Because we fear our time is fleeting, we give in to temptations in the present, temptations to make excuses for clinging to the power structures of this world. We use the world's way of overpowering others to

preserve our life now, but risk losing the life that is promised in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That life that is meant to be abundant in the freedom to let go of sin, because we are citizens of an eternal kingdom. It is Satan's lie to say, 'you only live once.'

I struggle with this, as I'm sure you do, and what we see in today's text is that Peter did too. Yes, Peter who sat face to face with God in the flesh hearing the Word directly from God. This struggle is what we see in Peter going from being a rock, to a stumbling block. In the first half of today's gospel passage, Jesus asks the disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?'

Peter steps up to be the first person in the New Testament to proclaim this gospel truth. Peter says, 'You are the Christ' – which is the anointed King or Messiah of God – and he adds, 'You are the Son of the Living God' – recognizing Jesus as divine. This is a truth, Jesus says, that only God can reveal to Peter, and so, for confessing this truth about Jesus, Peter is a 'rock,' but not just any rock, a rock to build a house on, a house for all who God calls to believe this truth. He gives Peter the keys to the kingdom.

In our services each week we make two confessions – each one designed to verbalize the truth. The first truth is that we are all sinners, equally guilty, not on some scale of bad or worse. This is necessary for us to recognize that we all equally fall short of God's glory. When you answer the call to confession with the corporate prayer, or when you are asked to ponder your sinfulness in silence, it is not to make you feel guilty but put us all on the same level. As Jesus said earlier in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, whether you are a murderer, or you 'only' got angry, indeed, even if you only call someone an 'idiot,' you are liable to the same judgement. We all want to think we are 'good,' more righteous than the next person. So, to hear that we are all equally sinful is a difficult truth, but to quote Brant Hanson, a favorite author, 'It is the Truth about us.'

Our second confession is our confession of faith, when we recite the faith of the church. In this moment, even if we have doubts about one teaching or another, and that is ok. We still proclaim as one church the time-honored truth that the church has passed down through the ages. These are the truths of the Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed and the scriptural creeds we use, as well as other confessions, which flesh out the same truth professed by Peter and earns him the title: 'rock.' It may be hard to understand, but 'It is the truth about Jesus.'

But in Peter, we see the challenge of knowing the truth about who Jesus is and living into that truth. In the second half of today's gospel reading, Peter's actions don't match his stated beliefs. When Jesus explains how he will take his throne, it isn't what Peter expected to hear. Jesus says he must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of religious authorities, and be killed on a Roman cross, but after three days, he will rise again. Ever the impetuous one, Peter again speaks up and rebukes Jesus. The word he uses is difficult to translate from the Greek, but '*hileos*' is an adjective used for appeasing a god. It is an appeal to 'pay off' a God to have mercy. I translated it as 'God forbid it.' What it shows us is that Peter wants to change God's plan.

Indeed, Peter says that 'For you Lord, this will never be done to you!' Peter cannot comprehend how Jesus could come into his kingdom by death and resurrection. Peter, knowing who Jesus truly is, still does not believe what Jesus has said to him. It seems he still does not understand that Jesus will not take his throne by force. If he dies, how will Jesus rule over Jerusalem, let alone

overthrow the Roman Empire? What Jesus describes, sounds like a win for the religious authorities, and what's worse, Caesar, will have also won by killing Jesus. He struggles to believe that death will not be the end. After all, even in the time of Jesus, people believed the lie of Satan, that death is the only possible end to life.

Peter is afraid, that if Jesus dies, then all will be lost – He seems to miss the resurrection part. Because if Jesus just dies and is not resurrected – believable since no one had ever been raised before – then maybe Jesus was not after all the anointed King, the Christ, Peter proclaimed him to be. Peter cannot see past death of Jesus as a victory for those who oppose Jesus. He does not yet understand that Jesus's reign comes from love and grace, not power over others, nor the victory of defeating your enemies.

This is still hard for us to understand today, so I can certainly identify with Peter in this moment. Peter believes he is acting out of love, wanting to preserve Jesus's life in this moment. He misses that the love of God is not merely preserving the life that you have now, but giving you the life and identity God has planned for you, now and eternally, rather than the life and identity the world says you should have. Your true identity is in God's Kingdom to restore all of creation. This is why Jesus calls Peter 'Satan,' because he is turning from God's plan to satisfy right now. It is our natural instinct to worry about our status right here and right now. We want to know that we are safe, and we are always afraid of uncertainty. Like Peter, we all want the promise of eternal life, but we hedge our bets. Sure, Peter has firsthand knowledge of who Jesus really is, but still he tries to fit Jesus into who he wants Jesus to be. Hence the harsh word from Jesus, calling Peter 'Satan,' and demoting the 'rock' to a 'stumbling block.'

Friends, we are called out by Jesus to confess the truth about ourselves – our sin – without excuse, and we are called out by Jesus to confess the truth about Him – our God and our brother – but like Peter, we struggle letting go of the ways of this world to do this. We struggle to trust that Jesus is who He says that He is, and that He is with us when we are afraid, even when we have doubts, and he is with us when we are in pain from the trials of this life.

Friends, this has not been an easy month or so for us in this church, losing several of our leaders. It has not been easy to see injustice in the streets and the clashes and unrest that follow. It has not been an easy five months since the onset of this COVID-19 global pandemic. It is not easy to be a follower of Christ in this increasingly digital age, where it feels like our Christian values are eroding in a secular society. But we must not succumb to the temptation of Peter and give in to the ways of this world. We must not believe the lies that Satan tells us: That we must forego Christian values, in order to protect our Christian culture, our religious freedoms, even our God.

We uphold our values, freedom, and God by living as Paul described in our text from Philippians: We are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but be humble as Jesus is humble, regarding others as better than ourselves, not to protect our own interests, but to protect the interests of others – to put on the mind of Christ. This mind is the sacrificial love of God in Christ, as Paul goes on to say, the God which humbly became a human, a slave in Christ, obedient even to the point of death on the cross.

What do we profit if we gain the whole world in the name of just calling ourselves 'Christians,'

but we lose our souls, lose our lives, lose the identities that God intends for us to have? We are a people called out to love sacrificially as God so loved us sacrificially, to send His Word to share in our humanity, but not for God's own benefit. No, God sent the only begotten Son – one with us in our humanity, and one with God from the beginning – to die for the world, and to rise for us, not because God needs the company, but so that we might share in God's life everlasting.

To be like Peter the stumbling block is to give sin and death power by relying on values of this world which tell us to be dominant over others and protect our security and comfort. These values do not rely on God's grace and love. In this, we become a stumbling block by excluding others from Christ. In the end, we can gain the world, but we lose who we are meant to be.

To be like Peter the rock is to confess Christ as King of all, who raises the lowly, humbles the proud. Trusting in Him whose love and grace protects us, without worldly expressions of power. In this, we are a rock on which to build a home for all people to become believers, by confessing their sins, and receiving through us the grace & love given by God, joining in our confession that Jesus is indeed our Lord and our God.

This is not the easy path, I know, but it is the path to which we are called as followers of Jesus. I know there are many reasons to feel scared, to wrestle with doubt and be tempted. But the good news is that our God – Father Son and Spirit – is with you and me, and our God is reaching out to all of us with truth, grace and love. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

(Matthew 16:12-27 Pastor's Translation) Then Jesus, having come into the *district* of Caesarea Philippi, questioned his disciples, asking, "Whom do *people* say that the *Son* of Man is?" And they said, 'Well, some say *John* the Baptist, but others *Elijah*, but others *Jeremiah*, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But whom do you *call* me?' Then *answering*, Simon Peter said, 'You are the *Christ*, the Son of the *Living God*.' Now answering, Jesus said to him, '*Blessed* are you *Simon* son of *Jonah*! For *flesh* and *blood* has not revealed this to you, but my *Father*, who is in the heavens. But I also say to you that you are Peter and on this *rock* I will *build* a *home* for the *assembly* I have called, and the gates of *hell* will not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the *Kingdom* of *Heaven*, and whatever you might bind on *earth*, will be *bound* in the heavens. Whatever you untie on the earth will be untied in the heavens.' Then he instructed the disciples in *order* that they would say to no one that He is the Christ. From that *time*, Jesus *began* to *show* his disciples that it is necessary for him to go away to *Jerusalem*, and to suffer many things from the elders, *chief* priests and scribes, and to be killed, and on the third *day*, to be raised. And having taken Jesus aside, *Peter* began to rebuke him, saying, 'God *forbid* it for you *Lord*, this will never ever be done to you!' But having turned, *Jesus* said to Peter, 'Get behind me *Satan*! You are a stumbling *block* to me. For your thoughts are not of God's thoughts, but the thoughts of *humanity*.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever might *desire* to save their identity will lose it. But whoever might lose their identity on account of me will find it. For what will it profit a person, if they gain the whole world, but lose their identity? What will a person *give* as an exchange for their identity? For the Son of *Man* is about to come in the glory of his Father, with his angels, and then he will give to each according to their practices.'