

Proper 16

Matthew 16: Peter's Confession

Petra Ecclesia

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Let's go to Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mt. Hermon! About the 40km north of the Jordan river, Mt. Hermon's snow melt became the headwaters of the Jordan River. At the base of Mt. Hermon, there were the temples to the gods. Pan. Zeus. Nemesis. Athena. So much religious power in one place! This city was once called Panias, named after the nature god Pan. But Phillip, the son of Herod the Great, honored Emperor Augustus by naming this city Caesarea. (But he thought he'd throw his own name in there as well.) See here is Augustus' temple. This is the center of the imperial cult.

Jesus and his disciples walk among these temples to the gods. At Augustus' statue, he reads the inscription, "Emperor Augustus Octavian, Son of God." When Halley's comet flew over Rome, Octavian said it was the spirit of his great-uncle and adoptive father Julius Caesar who had become a god. There spread stories of his miraculous birth. He declared himself now the Son of God and made himself Pontifex Maximus, high priest of all the gods. Thus, Octavian consolidated his political power with religious power and became the most powerful person who was yet to rule Rome. So, the title "Son of God" was about accruing power. This was one of Augustus favorite titles for himself.

Jesus and the disciples pause at the temple of Augustus to consider this. This is the power that oppresses their people. Jesus turns to them, he asks, "If Augustus is the Son of God, who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Son of Man was Jesus' favorite title for himself.)

One says, "Elijah!" Another, "John the Baptist" Yet, another, "Jeremiah."

“Aah, so they say I stand in the line of the prophets. That is true. It is a certain kind of power. But what else? Who do you say that I am?”

They all fall silent. They look at all the temples and the gods and the statue of Augustus and feel very small. Jesus looks very small. Some of them might be thinking, “Well...you...compared to these gods...to the Son of God that is Octavian...well...you’re nobody.” But Peter, large and brave of heart in the most unexpected and unreliable ways, declares, “You are the messiah, the son of the living God.” (We have a feast every January 18 to commemorate this moment, called Peter’s Confession.)

The disciples look upon the statues. Well, these gods are silent and dumb. They might as well be dead. What are the gods but marble and rock? Even Augustus was dead. They all look at Peter with awe—he just pulled out a chestnut! Jesus says, “Good for you, Peter. But, flesh and blood has not revealed this to you. But it is my father in heaven that has.” Jesus continues, “On this rock, I will build my church.”

The disciples puzzle over this. Peter is *petros*, which means rock. Is Jesus saying that he’s going to build his church upon Peter? That guy? Jesus gives them a look, “Remember your reflexive endings in Greek. I say on this *petra*, I will build my *ecclesia*; both have feminine endings. The rock is not *Petros*, not Peter. It’s supposed to be a joke. I think I’m going to regret this.”

“Walk with me,” Jesus continues. Jesus leads them to a cave. There were many caves in Caesarea Philippi. These caves were where the fertility gods retreated in the winter—to the world of the dead. The people of the city performed fertility rites each Spring to draw the gods back to the world of the living, to make their crops grow. At the biggest cave known as “The Gates of Hades,” Jesus stops and says, “I’m giving you the keys to the kingdom. Not even the Gates of Hades will prevail over the kingdom. Whatever you bind on earth, you will bind in heaven; whatever you loose on earth, you will loose in heaven.”

But for the disciples, nothing Jesus is saying makes much sense. First, what does Jesus mean by ecclesia, an assembly? The assemblies that come to sacrifice in Caesarea Philippi were part of the imperial cult—they are both religious and political. Bowing down to the gods means bowing down to the emperor. What ecclesia is Jesus talking about? Their band of twelve? Perhaps, the larger group that has been traveling with him to chapter 16 of Matthew? Does Matthew mean the community that is writing this gospel? Or, is it bigger? Moreover, if it's not Peter, what rock is it that the church will be built on? Is it an assembly that proclaims Jesus as the son of the living God? Is the foundational rock not actual rock, but a theological assertion that we trust the power of God and not the power of empire?

But the biggest part of this discussion is that Jesus confirms that he is the messiah! Messiah, meaning anointed one, meaning king. They all suspected; but up to this point, no one has actually had the guts to name it. Even John the Baptist was hedgy about it when he asked Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?” They no longer have to wait. Here, in Caesarea Philippi, where the assemblies are making their homage to the emperor and capitulating to the rule of Rome, Jesus confirms to his disciples that he is king.

So, he's the one. The messiah. And quickly, the disciples make plans to sharpen their swords. Is now the time Jesus will restore Israel and break the yoke of the Roman occupation? Peter and the others are really excited.

Well, in the next scene in the Gospel of Matthew, we shall see how wrong Peter and the disciples get it. Jesus will clarify that the messiah has come to suffer, die and then rise. Peter will throw a fit. He will rebuke Jesus, saying, “The messiah cannot suffer or die! That's not how the vision goes.” Then Jesus tells his disciples something absolutely devastating. Those who want to follow him need also to pick up their own cross. Following Jesus means more than uttering a theological assertion. When Jesus tells

them to keep things secret, it wasn't because he was hatching a plan to overthrow the empire; he tells them to keep things secret because they don't understand what he really means.

What about us? How much do we understand today, having read to the end of the story many times? What does it mean to you to claim Jesus as messiah, as king in the reign of God as opposed to the reign of worldly power? What does it mean that we have keys? What are the keys? What does it mean for you that you are given power to bind and to loose?

When I think about binding and loosing, certain images come up for me. Like binding up the broken hearted. Or loosening the bonds of injustice and setting the captive free. I believe these might be some of the keys to the reign of God, to what it means to be church. What other keys might you be given for binding and loosing? Today, I invite you to consider this immense power that Jesus offers to the church and what you might, as part of the assembly, do with it. How will you bind and loose today?