

# Stumbling Block or Solid Rock?

## Flawed Yet Faithful Disciples

1 Peter 2:1-10 and Matthew 16:13-23

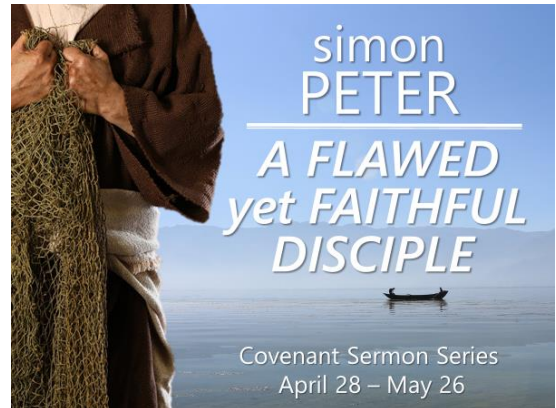
Sunday, May 12, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

We continue our five-week series on Peter, the flawed yet faithful disciple today. Peter is mentioned over 120 times in the gospels and about 190 in the New Testament, much more than any other disciple. He is a de facto leader of the group, a model disciple.

Sometimes he acts foolishly or selfishly, and sometimes he acts courageously and wisely, eventually becoming a leader in the early church. He's flawed, yet faithful.



The inspiration from this series comes from Adam Hamilton, a Methodist pastor in Kansas City, and you see a quote from him in the bulletin.

My hope is that by learning about Peter, we can learn about ourselves and how we can be less flawed and be more as faithful disciples.

The first reading from 1 Peter, a book written by Peter or by one of his followers, invites listeners to grow in faith, to be nourished with “pure spiritual milk” and then to become more inter-connected as the church, as “living stones” built on top of the cornerstone, which is Jesus.

The stone imagery carries over into our second reading, as does the idea of individuals becoming part of the community, the church.

A few notes about the reading:

Different branches of the church have varying interpretations of Jesus’ words to Peter and the keys of the kingdom.

This section has the first of three passion predictions, when Jesus tells his disciples quite plainly that he will die in Jerusalem—a message that was hard for the disciples to understand, as you’ll hear.

This is primarily a passage about identity—the identity of Jesus and the identity formation of Peter.

Presbyterian seminary president Paul Roberts sees this passage through the concept of Ubuntu, which suggests that we need each other to fully claim our identities. "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."

Peter and Jesus both share insights, affirm the other's identity, and thus help prepare each other for ministry. Overall the text reminds us that we need each other.

One more thing: Notice how the disciples are quick to respond when Jesus asks them a general question about what other people think, but when he asks them a personal question, only Peter answers.

Listen for God's word:

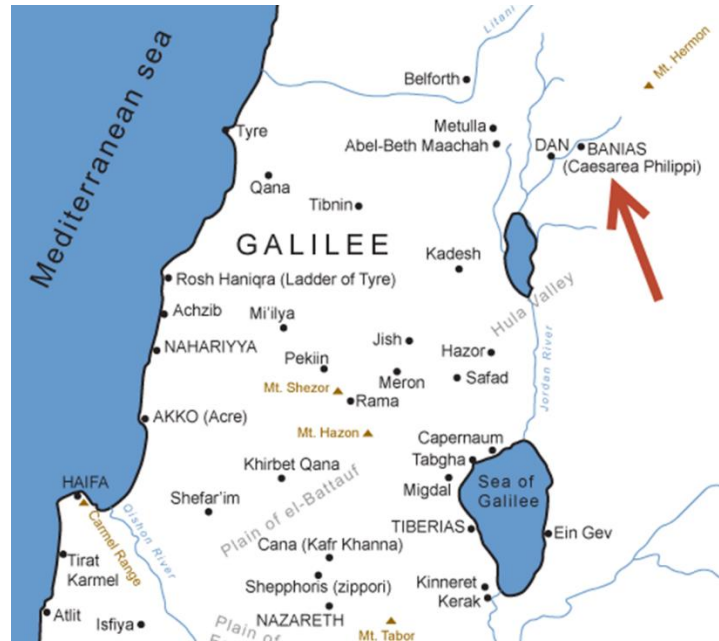
<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The gospel reading begins with a parenthetical geographic reference that we might be tempted to ignore: Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi.

Most of us, myself included, have not been to the Holy Land, and from what I understand, most people who go don't make it to Caesarea Philippi, located in a somewhat remote region, 25 miles north of Sea of Galilee.

The region had been called Paneas (or Baniyas), after Pan, a Greek god of creation. It's an area of natural beauty, with large Mt Hermon nearby. Apparently, Mt Hermon the only place you can ski in Israel.



In the time of the life of Jesus, Paneas was renamed Caesarea Philippi. Pan was a Greek god of nature. Philip was one of the children of Herod the Great, and Philip renamed this area to honor the Emperor Caesar.

So Jesus brings his disciples to this area originally named for a famous Greek god, recently renamed for the Roman Emperor, and he asks them: Who do people say that I am?

They share some responses, and then Jesus asks them directly: What about you? We know what they think; I want to know what you think.

Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

According to the text, Peter is the only one to make the affirmation of faith, that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus affirms him, telling him that he is the Rock on which the church will be built.

This is a bold and defiant affirmation to make in this region first named for a Greek god, later named for the Roman Emperor who thought of himself as a son of god. By saying Jesus is the Christ, you're saying that Caesar is not. Peter was pledging his loyalty to Jesus and not to the Emperor.

A few weeks ago, a friend posted an image on social media, with words that reflect Peter's affirmation:

Sometimes, being a good Christian meant being a bad Roman  
--Stephen Mattson, Sojourners

Peter seems to be saying that he wants to be a follower of Jesus, rather than the Emperor. He sees Jesus as his Messiah, his Savior.

But then Jesus continues, telling them that being the Messiah might not be what they expected.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Peter is stunned by this saying this should never happen to Jesus.

Jesus seems to get angry, rebuking Peter for not understanding what Jesus' life and mission were all about.

He goes from being the solid rock to the stumbling block just like that.

Peter seems to have not quite fully understood what it meant to affirm Jesus as the Christ.

Christ was not his last name. It means Savior, Messiah. Some people, apparently Peter, hoped that the Messiah would come with political and military force to crush the Romans and establish a new regime.

You almost get the sense that Peter was imagining that as "the Rock" he would be the right hand man of Jesus, who would be president and CEO and commander in chief of this new regime. He'd have the corner office and great parking spot for his chariot.

So he was surprised and upset to hear Jesus talking about suffering and dying. Not the image he had in mind, apparently. Jesus continues in Matthew 16:24-25, saying:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Being a follower of Jesus is not about power and prestige. It is about self-denial and sacrificially serving others.

I hope we're learning that here.

Two weeks ago, we welcomed nine youth into membership through our Confirmation program. Last week we baptized an adorable little girl.

Whenever new members join this church or whenever we have baptisms, we ask people to make an affirmation of faith, that essentially says "Jesus is my Lord and Savior"—similar words to what Peter said to Jesus.

When we welcome new members or have baptisms, I wish I could tell people that this meant that you would never have to deal with hardship or challenge, that life would be smooth sailing with no problems at all.

But it doesn't work like that.

Being a Christian means following Jesus into a life of self-denial and sacrifice, or striving for justice and righteousness, of serving God's kingdom, of finding abundant and eternal life. Being a Christian means growing strong and sure in God's love and God's hopes for the world.

So the question for today is are you a stumbling block or a solid rock?

Are you getting in the way of God's will, are you an obstacle for God's love? Or are you a strong foundation for good things to happen in the world?

How about with your family and loved ones? Stumbling block or solid rock?

- In those family relationships, are you the one who is kind and patient and forgiving?



- Are you the one who is a good listener and a bridge builder?
- Are you the one who has the courage to say what needs to be said, with love?
- Are you the one who brings joy and laughter?

How about with school or work or wherever you spend most of your time? Are you a stumbling block or a solid rock?

- Do you do the right thing even when everyone else seems to be doing the wrong thing?
- Are resisting the temptation to do the wrong things to be popular or advance?
- Are you supportive, kind, and friendly?
- Do you reach out to other people and make them feel welcome?

And how about in church and in your Christian living?

- Are you going through the motions, or are you sincerely living out your faith?
- Are you reading your Bible and saying your prayers?
- Are you finding ways to actively grow in faith and encourage other people?
- Are you letting God transform you and work through you?

The Bible uses this imagery of being a solid rock or a living stone to help us understand what being a Christian is all about.

It's good imagery, especially when you see things like Stonehenge or Machu Picchu. Those are some solid rocks.

You know where else there are solid rocks? Covenant Presbyterian Church. Did you ever notice how many thousands of bricks and cinder blocks were used to make up this church? And that's just the building—this building where lives have been changed and strengthened for decades.



The strength of this church is the people—people who like Peter are gradually figuring out what it means to affirm Jesus as Lord and Savior, and how to live the new life.

As you walked into church today, I hope you got to pick up a stone. If not, please get one on the way out. That stone can be your prayer stone this week.

Let us pray

*Loving God, in Jesus Christ you offer us new and abundant life, along with new purpose and direction. Help us to be strong in your word and in your love, to make a difference in the world. Amen.*