

# Bedrock

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Matthew 16:13-20**

*People followed Jesus everywhere he went – even to the edge of their world. Some of them fixed their hopes on Jesus; others, in their official capacity, tested him. Jesus cautioned his disciples to be careful.*

When Jesus came into the district of Philip's Caesarea, he asked his disciples, "Who are people saying the Son of Man is?" They said, "Some [say] John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "And you – who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus said to him, "How fortunate you are, Simon Jonahson! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I'm telling you, 'You are a rock.' And it's on this bedrock that I will build my church. And the gates of Hades will not have the strength to prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you tie up on earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven." After this, he commanded the disciples to tell no one that he himself was the Messiah.

## **Children's Story**

*Dominus vobiscum.*

Ιησους Χριστος αγαπα σε· αγαπας συ αυτον;

Verstehen Sie? Warum nicht?

παλιν· Ιησους Χριστος αγαπα σε· αγαπας συ αυτον;

Können Sie nicht verstehen? Es ist nicht so schwer.

παλιν· Ιησους Χριστος αγαπα σε· αγαπας συ αυτον;

**Ιησους Χριστος αγαπα σε· αγαπας συ αυτον;**

Können Sie nicht verstehen?

*Dominus vobiscum.*

Could you understand any of what I was saying to you? Probably not. I was speaking Latin and Greek and German. That's not a very good way to talk with you, is it? – using languages that you don't understand.

Some people think that anyone can understand English if you say it loud enough. But that's not true.

When we talk with people, we need to talk in a way they can understand, using language that they know, using words that they know. That's important any time. And it's especially important when we're talking with people about Jesus.

## **Sermon**

Today's Gospel reading is a troublesome text. To begin with, it's difficult to translate. There's wordplay: *rock* and *bedrock*, for example. You want to get that right. There are mixed metaphors: a church built on bedrock is suddenly in motion, launching an assault against the domain of death itself; a set of keys is used not to lock and unlock things, but to tie them up or untie them. And then there are certain traditional translations that tend to obscure details of the text. So, simply from the standpoint of translation, today's Gospel reading is a troublesome text.

It's troublesome, too, because it has been a focus of controversy in the church. This text puts the Roman Catholic church on one side and Protestant and Eastern churches on the other. It's all about the

role of Peter in the church. That and the function of those keys. And whether Peter's role continues in a series of successors. Jesus said, "The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (Matthew 23:2). The question is – and this is the controversy – "Do popes sit on Peter's seat?" The short answer to that question is, I think, "No."

The notion of a Petrine dynasty, comprising a long series of popes, is without support in the Bible. And it is foreign to the first centuries of the church's history. So, as a good Protestant, I reject papal supremacy. The pope is not the first among equals; the church does not find its unity under the pope. Christ alone is first; Christ alone is head of the church; Christ alone is the focus and the source of the church's unity. I don't intend to say much more about that controversy. Instead I will stick to the text, to which I now turn.

First, there's the story itself.

**Jesus and his disciples have crossed the great Galilean lake.** It was probably another attempt on their part to outrun the crowds. And this time, apparently, they succeeded – for a little while, at least – and Jesus had some private time with his disciples. It wasn't easy, though. They had to go all the way to the edge of the world of first century Palestinian Judaism. There, in the far northeast, Philip the Tetrarch, the son of Herod the Great, had renamed a city in honor of Caesar. It was called Philip's Caesarea to distinguish it from the other Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. It was a cosmopolitan center and a religious crossroads. In Philip's Caesarea a host of gods and lords were honored. Chief among them, of course, was Caesar himself, who was both lord and god.

In the shadow of this city, Jesus asked his question: "Who are people saying the Son of Man is?" Perhaps the question reflects no more than curiosity. And who wouldn't be curious? Jesus certainly had been attracting attention. Jesus once asked the crowds why they had gone out to see John the Baptist. Who did they think John was? Now he's asking the same question about himself. Who do people think he is? Who are they going out to see?

The answers to that curious question are themselves curious. *John the Baptist? Elijah? Jeremiah? One of the prophets?* Since when did Jews believe in reincarnation? Reincarnation has no place in the Old Testament or in first century Judaism. The point, I suppose, is that people considered Jesus to be a prophet. John the Baptist had been preparing Messiah's way, as a prophet. Apparently people saw Jesus in much the same way. The kingdom of God was coming; Messiah-fever was in the air; and Jesus, like John, was preparing the way. That's what the people were saying.

Then Jesus put the question to his disciples: "And you – who do you say I am?" And there in the shadow of Philip's Caesarea, with its gods and its lords, Simon Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." *You, Jesus, are not preparing the way; you are the way. You, Jesus, are not merely serving the kingdom; you are the king. You, Jesus, are not only asking the questions; you are the answer. You – not Philip, not Caesar, no other king or god or lord – you are the Son of the living and true God. All that Israel has been waiting for, all that God has promised – it's you! Jesus, it's you!* That was Simon's answer.

**Jesus was moved, maybe a little surprised – pleasantly; and he had more to say.** First, as a precaution, he put things in perspective: "How fortunate you are, Simon Jonahson! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Simon, Jonah's son, very much rooted in earth and sea, had not reasoned or intuited his way to perception. His perception was not the product of human mind or muscle. It was a gift, a gift from God – God who made the earth, but is not of the earth. "Simon," Jesus said, "you know who you are and where you're from; we all do. You got lucky. Don't let it go to your head."

But Jesus didn't leave him there, in the back with the fish and the nets. He went on: "Simon, I'm telling you, 'You are a rock.'" Now a rock isn't always a good thing. After he stepped out of the boat –

do you remember this from two weeks ago? – after he stepped out of the boat to walk on the water toward Jesus, Simon began to sink like a rock. But a rock can be more than a sinking stone. A rock can be solid ground, bedrock even. And that’s what Jesus saw.

“And it’s on this bedrock,” Jesus said, “that I will build my church.” Is the bedrock Simon Peter? Or is the bedrock his confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah? That’s the controversial question. *Is the bedrock Simon or his confession?* The answer? Both. The bedrock is Simon making and keeping his confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah. On this confession, faithfully made, Jesus will build his church. And he will start with Simon Peter. Peter will confess Jesus before Jews, and Jesus will build the church. Peter will confess Jesus before Samaritans, and Jesus will build the church. Peter will confess Jesus before Gentiles, and Jesus will build the church. You can follow this trajectory in the first chapters of the book of Acts.

Now, the rock will never be Simon Peter in himself. In fact, he will become a stumbling stone, and he himself will stumble. The rock will always be Simon Peter confessing Jesus as Messiah!

**And the story goes on. Jesus has still more to say.** Apparently some day the church will assault the “gates of Hades.” The gates of Hades are the doors of death. When the church confesses Jesus as Messiah, it’s the risen Jesus we confess. Death could not hold him. Death could not tie him up and keep him. He burst free from death. Death did not have the last word. And death will not have the last word. Jesus will bring his people out of death. Meanwhile the church will proclaim and live Jesus’ victory over death. We will not see death as the end, or as the ultimate word; we will not cede that power to death. Jesus speaks the ultimate word; he is the ultimate word.

**And then there are the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.”** On this I will say just a couple of things briefly. First, here in Matthew 16 the keys are given to Peter; and he will use them. Again, you can follow this in the early chapters of the book of Acts. However, in Matthew 18, the keys are given to the whole church, given to be used – whatever those keys are. In our tradition we have said that the keys of the kingdom are “the preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83). Which brings us to the second thing.

The church’s use of the keys is not an exercise of raw power. The church always attempts, through its use of the keys, to give expression to the judgments of heaven. Notice the text: “Whatever you tie up on earth will be tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in heaven.” The church always attempts, through its use of the keys, to give expression to the judgments of heaven – whether a judgment about moral or ethical standards, or a judgment about welcoming or excluding someone from the church. In any case, the foundation of these judgments is always this: that Jesus is God’s Messiah, and the church follows his steps. (More on that next Sunday.)

**Finally, Jesus says one more thing in this story.** “He commanded the disciples to tell no one that he himself was the Messiah.” In other words, to tell no one that he is not preparing the way, he is the way. Don’t tell it? But that’s the church’s confession. That’s the heart and soul of the faith. That’s our witness to the world. How can the disciples not tell it?!

Actually, there were at least two good reasons for them not to tell it, not yet. First, they themselves didn’t really know what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. They had more to learn, more to see, more to experience. God is known only through time, only in time, only over time – by what happens, by what God does, by what God endures.<sup>1</sup> So it would be with Jesus the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup>At the burning bush, Moses asks God for his name, for a way to sum up God in a word or a phrase. God refuses. “I will be who I will be” (Exodus 3:14). God is not “summed up”; God is known through the story that God unfolds in the world, the whole story.

A second reason to say nothing was that people had too many wrong ideas about the Messiah. Jesus would not be the Messiah they expected, so to tell them he was the Messiah would mislead them. First, Jesus would have to complete his journey, then they could point to Jesus and say, “This is the Messiah!” And then they would have some explaining to do.

Well, that in a nutshell is the story. Let me conclude with a few words – tentative words – about some implications of this story.

First and foremost is this: Jesus Christ is at the center; Jesus Christ is the center. The church confesses Jesus as Messiah (Christ), or there is no church. If we omit the part of our message about Jesus as the world’s true lord and king, then we have no message left, and there is no church. But through our confession, through our faith that Jesus is lord and king, Jesus will build his church. Notice: Jesus builds the church. Not you. Not I. Jesus. Ours is to hold on to our confession, to the church’s faith, and to leave it to Jesus to build the church.

Second and related, there’s this: We may need to translate our message. Most places in the world these days, you can get by with English. Somebody who know some English will probably be around. But not everyone knows “church-speak” – and that’s all I’ve been using, I know – not everyone knows “church-speak,” not even church people. To say “Jesus” and “Messiah” and “Lord” and “King” may not communicate. And the answer to that is not to say the same words again, only louder. Somehow, I think, we need to learn how to translate Jesus to people who don’t know him. And we need to translate Jesus to people who have all sorts of pre-formed or mal-formed ideas about him – learned, no doubt, when the church has been false to our confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus himself asked questions that helped him find out what was getting through (“Who are people saying the Son of Man is?”). Perhaps that’s a necessary strategy for the church, when we are trying to proclaim the faith and want to be sure we are translating it well.

Oh, one last thing. It seems almost an add-on to the text, but I don’t know how to avoid it. St. Francis of Assisi, I think, said: “Preach the gospel all the time; when necessary use words.” Our confession will have maximum clarity and our confession will have maximum credibility, when we show people Jesus as well as tell them about Jesus. I think that, too, is part of the bedrock on which the church is built.