

## **God-Given**

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

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### **Matthew 16:13-20**

*Pharisees and Sadducees formed a sort of two-party system in first-century Israel. Most often they were locked in an intense rivalry, but the two parties did manage to cooperate, from time to time, when there was a common foe. One such foe was Jesus. So it was no wonder that Jesus cautioned his disciples against the perspectives of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. But if the two major parties were rejected, what then?*

When Jesus came into the district of Philip's Caesarea, he asked his disciples, "Who are the people saying the Son of Man is?" They said, "Some, 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, "Simon, Jonah's son, you are blessed! Flesh and blood did not disclose this to you, my Father in heaven did. And I'm telling you, 'You are Peter (a rock).' And it's on this bedrock that I will build my congregation. And Hades' gates will not have the strength to prevail against it. To you (Peter) I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you constrain on earth will be constrained in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven."

After this, he commanded the disciples to tell no one that he himself was the Messiah.

### **Children's Story**

I grew up in a small town in Massachusetts called Whitinsville. I wasn't supposed to grow up there. But I did. We moved to Whitinsville when I was seven. We weren't supposed to. My mom and dad said so. But we moved there anyway.

I think I know why we moved to Whitinsville. And it had nothing to do with my mom and dad. It had nothing to do with what they wanted. Well, maybe there were lots of reasons why we moved to Whitinsville. And there sure were lots of things that happened after we moved to Whitinsville.

But as far as I'm concerned, one thing that happened in Whitinsville was more important than all the others. I'm sure it could have happened somewhere else, but it happened in Whitinsville. In Whitinsville, I found my way into the church. In Whitinsville, I learned about Jesus. In Whitinsville, I became a Christian.

So I think we moved to Whitinsville, because God had some plans for me there. I didn't know it at the time. But afterward, I knew for sure.

### **Sermon**

A hallmark of our Calvinist tradition is an emphasis on the sovereignty of God. I suppose a case could be made that a favorite Scripture verse in the Calvinist tradition is Psalm 115:3:

“Our God is in heaven – he can do whatever he wants” (CEB). That sounds almost whimsical, as if God can make square circles, as if God can make a light beer that tastes good. It sounds almost capricious, as if God can be for you one minute and against you the next. But we don’t mean either of those things when we say that God is sovereign – nor does Psalm 115.

Rather, when we say that God is sovereign, we mean that God is completely free and completely in control, that God is neither limited nor surprised. Bringing it down to earth, when we say that God is sovereign, we mean that we are not victims of fate or of blind chance, but that in some way, not necessarily in a way that we can understand, God has everything in hand (cp. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27). More than that, when we say that God is sovereign, we mean that God is directing everything toward a goal or purpose, specifically the coming of the kingdom that will surround and embrace every one of God’s children with divine love.

Having said that much about the Calvinist tradition and God’s sovereignty, I readily admit that I read today’s Gospel portion from Matthew 16 with Calvinist eyes. And I don’t apologize for that, because doing so allows me to recognize some aspects of the passage that I might otherwise miss, in particular, how “God-given” key elements in the Gospel story are.

**Take, for example, the question Jesus puts to his disciples.** It’s an important question. “Who are the people saying the Son of Man is?” In other words, *When they take measure of me – of my words, of my actions, of my journeys, of my companions – what conclusion do the people reach about my identity? Do they have any idea who I am and why I am here?*

The answers mentioned by the disciples indicate that the people were confused and that they didn’t get who Jesus was or what he was doing. Some were saying that he was John the Baptist. What? Had John been raised from the dead, John who was so recently killed by Herod Antipas? Others were saying that Jesus was Elijah. In other words, that Jesus was a forerunner of the messiah, a messenger from God, announcing the approach of the kingdom. What was John the Baptist then?

Finally, still others were saying that Jesus was Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Had first-century Jews adopted a belief in reincarnation? Probably not. This was a way of saying that Jesus struck them as a prophet, as a messenger from God, whether announcing the kingdom’s approach or not. Even more, this was a way of saying that, with Jesus around, it was like having Jeremiah with them again. Somehow Jesus struck chords of communal memory that were associated with Jeremiah. That’s not too surprising. Jeremiah was a prophet to an exiled people, and, in the first century, Jews were still exiles, living under imperial domination, this time in their own land.

Enough of that, however. Jesus moved on to a more important question. “How about you?” he asked his disciples. “Who do you say I am?” *Never mind what the people think. What do you think? You have walked with me and talked with me. You have seen me at work. What’s your conclusion?*

Peter speaks up. But he’s speaking for himself, not for the others. The disciples haven’t held a caucus or conducted a straw poll. Actually, for his own part, Peter hasn’t done a rigor-

ous analysis. So his response is not a deduction. It's more an intuition. And he blurts it out. He says, "You are the messiah, the son of the living God." There's more here, I think, than Peter realizes.

On the one hand, there is the basic identification. Peter has somehow concluded that Jesus is Israel's long-awaited messiah, that he is the one who will be Israel's great king. Peter expresses himself in the poetic parallelism that he had heard in the Scriptures, saying one thing in two different ways. To say that Jesus is the son of God is another way for Peter to say that he is Israel's king. "Son of God" was a royal title, given because the king was deemed to have divine authorization to rule and to have a special connection with God. If Israel was the chosen-by-God people, then Israel's king was the chosen-by-God ruler of that chosen-by-God people.

But there's more going on in this case, more than Peter knows. Because this king is not someone who rises to the office and, for that reason, is designated the son of God. No, this king, this messiah, has come from God. This messiah is the son of God not by identification, but in essence. He is the eternal Son of God the Father. And God has given this Son, his only genuine Son, to be Israel's messiah. And so, God is sovereign, not only in the sense of being in control, but also in the sense of being deeply engaged, engaged enough to put some skin in the game.

**But there's more to Peter's statement than an identification of Jesus.** Notice how Jesus responds. "Simon, Jonah's son," – *since we're identifying people by their family connections, I'll do the same for you* – "you are blessed! Flesh and blood did not disclose this to you, my Father in heaven did." Then Jesus moves from his disciple's given name, Simon, to the nickname he had earned in virtue of his character. "You are Peter," Jesus says. "You are a rock." And this rock is crucial. Jesus says, "It's on this bedrock that I will build my congregation."

The church has argued for ages about the role of Peter. The Roman Catholic church has its claims and its own version of history. The Eastern Church and the Protestant Church tell a different story. Be that as it may, this much at least is clear in the story: the point at issue is the recognition and the confession that Jesus is Israel's messiah, that Jesus is the Son of God – in the sense that Peter meant it and more!

There are two important things to note about this recognition and confession. First of all, it is the foundation of the church. The hymn has it right: *The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord*. The church rises and falls on this confession. Whatever else the church may be, it is the one congregation, across the ages and around the globe, the one congregation that acknowledges and proclaims that Jesus is Israel's messiah, that he is God's only Son and the Savior of the world, that Jesus is the answer to the pain and misery that convulse nations and rend families and afflict tired old men and women. The church that acknowledges Jesus in this way, that proclaims Jesus in this way, and that follows Jesus in this way, is the congregation that Jesus himself is building.

The second thing to note is this. To recognize and acknowledge Jesus as messiah, as the Son of God – to have faith, in other words – is a gift of God. As much as Jesus himself is God-given, so too is our faith in Jesus.

Did you ever wonder why you have faith in Jesus? Maybe your faith is strong. Maybe your faith is tentative. Maybe your faith is blended with an equal measure of doubt. Maybe like Peter, the rock, your faith will crumble when it's stressed to the extreme. But whatever its precise shape, you have some kind of faith in Jesus. Did you ever wonder why? Did you ever wonder where your faith came from? Did you ever wonder why you have faith and someone else doesn't?

You can look to experience, life circumstances, and exposure to explain your faith. But none of that adds up to enough. In the end, faith – even your faith – is the work of the sovereign God. The identity of Jesus is not disclosed to us by flesh and blood, not by human argument or reason. Rather the identity of Jesus is disclosed to us by God alone.

I remember when Jan and I used to argue about the Bible. I remember when Jan's dad tried to convince me that the Gospel is true. I, too, was a rock. I was impermeable. I rejected it all. Until the morning I woke up and knew that the Gospel was true, knew that the church was right about Jesus, knew that I needed to be a different kind of rock. Here's the thing. I didn't make that happen, and no one around me did either. It was God-given, given by the sovereign God.

And it's our God-given faith, faith that we share with the one church across the ages and around the globe – it's our God-given faith, faith in Jesus Christ, that lies at the heart of what Jesus is building and doing in the world, what he will build and do until the kingdom comes.

**And what Jesus is building and doing has everything to do with life.** Notice Peter's confession. "You are the messiah, the son of the living God." Not just "son of God," but "son of the living God." On the one hand, of course, this is a statement about God. Unlike all the other so-called "gods" that were part of daily life in the ancient world and part of imperial life under the caesars, this God was not inert wood or stone or silver or gold. This God was beyond representation. The only kind of image that could be made of this God was a living image: human beings made in the image of God, living and moving, thinking and acting; and especially, the human being, Jesus Christ, the living image of the invisible God, living and moving, thinking and acting, and especially suffering and dying, and supremely rising to live forever.

The life in Jesus was and is the life of the living God, life that cannot be held down by death. It's this same life that God gives to his children, new life that will fracture the stranglehold of death. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says that Hades' gates won't have the strength to prevail against his congregation. Hades is the realm of death, the power of death. But through new, God-given life, it is a realm burst asunder and a power disarmed. Yes, death still thrashes and flails about. Death still stalks the earth, claiming its victims, whether sick children, helpless soldiers, or music fans crushed by collapsing stages.

But this isn't the whole story. Death may be rending and tearing and spilling blood, obliterating people by erasing their minds, afflicting people with curses that are worse than any disease. Death may be doing all that. But the defeat of death has been set in motion. First of all, our faith is in Jesus, the messiah, the one who died and was raised. And again, this is not raised back to standard, ordinary life, but to the life of the coming age, life over which death

has no power. And it's this life that God will give, will give by sovereign decision, by sovereign mercy, to every one of his children. And by this gift, the children of God will live without fear of death. Death will become for us a toothless and declawed monster, a relic of a broken world that has been repaired, repaired by the sovereign action of God.

The God-giveness of the messiah, the God-giveness of our faith, and the God-giveness of new life – it all leads to the everlasting Kingdom of God, the kingdom the church has been called to serve in faith until it comes.