

Sermon 8-23-26
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Based on the first lesson and Gospel for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Isaiah 51:1-6 and Matthew 16:13-20.

Rocky Gets His Name.

Caesarea Philippi. We've examined it before. Today it's a ruin managed by the Israeli park system. But in Jesus' time it had been a pagan religious retreat for more than a thousand years. And close by was the ancient Israeli city of Dan — a place where the first northern Israeli king after the breakup of David's empire set up a shrine with a golden calf. King Jereboam was concerned that the people of the ten northern tribes under his command would continue to worship in Jerusalem, thereby threatening his rule. So against Yahweh's command, Jereboam set up two places of worship using golden images of calves — in direct violation of the first commandment. Dan was one of the places.

In more ancient times Caesarea Philippi was called Paneas in honor of the ancient Greek god, Pan, who was worshipped there after Alexander the Great incorporated the city into his empire. The ancient city stood on a large flat rock platform at the foot of a sheer rock cliff. There is a great cave in the wall of the cliff. In ancient times it was called the Gates of Hades — the way into the underworld of death. Until an earthquake in 1000A.D., a large spring with a very strong flow poured its water out of the cave into what is now called the Banias River, a major tributary of the Jordan. Ancient worshippers sacrificed their children to Baal and Pan by throwing them into the fast moving, deep water. Following the earthquake, the flow of the spring was greatly diminished and to this day it emerges at the foot of the cliff instead of from the cave.

Caesar August was Herod the Great's patron. Since Caesar had declared himself a god in the Roman pantheon, Herod decided to honor Caesar by erecting a gleaming marble temple to Caesar in the city. Thus, it became Caesarea in honor of Caesar and a must visit religious tourist retreat for ancient Romans. Herod's son, Philip built an administrative capital there. So the city became Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the other cities name Caesarea.

It was to this location that Jesus brought the twelve on a religious retreat of their own — a retreat that was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. So, why here? What were a bunch of good Jewish boys doing at a pagan religious retreat? That's question number one. In addition there are two geographic features of this place that will figure prominently in what Jesus had to say. One is the great rock platform on which Caesarea Philippi was built. The other is the deep cave in the cliff wall — once known as the Gates of Hades.

Last week I again presented the late Michael S. Heiser's thesis based on The Tower of Babel incident in Genesis 11. That thesis begins with God's command to Noah and his family after the flood found in Genesis 9:1 to fill all the earth with people. But as we learn in Genesis 11, when the population of earth had sufficiently increased, its people deliberately built the city of Babel so that they would not be dispersed all over the earth. Therefore, Yahweh went down and judged them. He confused our languages and sent us traveling to the various continents He had set up in the wake of the flood. In Heiser's thesis, Yahweh did

one more thing at Babel. Using the Qumran copy of Deuteronomy 32:7-9 as a proof text, Heiser argues that because of our disobedience, Yahweh divorced humanity at Babel and put the new nations He had created under the spiritual authority of the spiritual beings Yahweh had created that Scripture calls the sons of God. However, these sons of God rebelled against Yahweh and led the nations into idolatry and the worship of themselves. This is reflected in the judgments spoken against the sons of God in Psalm 82.

Thus, by the time of Jesus, all the nations had fallen into idolatry — with one exception, Israel. This was because Yahweh announced in Deuteronomy 32:9 that Abraham and Abraham's descendants would be Yahweh's portion out of all the nations. And this is how things were when Jesus was born. Yet, in the intervening centuries, Yahweh had sent prophets who proclaimed that when Messiah came, the pagan nations would rally to Messiah and return to Yahweh. For instance, this very thing is prophesied in today's first lesson where we heard Yahweh say in Isaiah 51:4-5, "4 Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. 5 My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait." The coastlands are the shores of the distant nations and continents.

So, once we understand all this, the reason Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi becomes obvious. He — Yahweh, the Son, incarnate in human flesh — had come to claim what was rightfully His. He had come to dethrone the sons of God from their positions as false gods over humanity. He had come to dethrone Satan who apparently had rule over these disobedient spiritual beings. And a week later when Jesus went a little further north to Mount Hermon and was transfigured there, He expanded His claim yet further. For Mount Hermon was a site where a previous group of the sons of God had rebelled against Yahweh prior to the flood. We're told of this in Genesis 6 and the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch.

As Messiah, Jesus came to reclaim what was rightfully His — to reclaim all of humanity, Gentile as well as Jew. And by taking His disciples north to Caesarea Philippi and Mount Hermon, He staked His claim on earthly territory previously staked out by the rebellious sons of God as well as rebellious Israelites. And remember the name of these spiritual creatures for their name also plays a role in today's Gospel lesson.

Matthew 16:13, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'" Even this first sentence has a huge trigger, the term "the Son of Man." We've explained this many times before, but here we go again. The prophet Daniel had many amazing visions and experiences. In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel tells us that he had a visionary dream in which he was transported into the heavenly throne room where the glorious Ancient of Days took His seat. Opponents of God are also in this vision. However, the dream shifts to this amazing sight. Daniel 7:13-14, "13 'I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.'"

Therefore, by using the term "Son of Man" Jesus made a huge claim — that He is the one Daniel saw in the vision; that He is the one worthy of service by all peoples, nations and languages. And This includes you and me. And, did you notice? All nations? Again, the

Tower of Babel is in play! All nations means all humanity. Most importantly, since service is worship and worship is service, Jesus made the claim that He is Yahweh. For, it is sin to worship and serve any other so-called god except Yahweh..

Now, what's interesting is that twelve good Jewish men didn't immediately run away from Jesus when He claimed the title, Son of Man. They had seen and heard too much by this point in Jesus' ministry. For instance, who can calm storms and walk on water? So, they answered Jesus' question in Matthew 16:14, "And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'" Notice. Messiah is not on this list. In John chapter 4 we learn that early on in His ministry, the Samaritans declared Jesus to be the Savior of the world. Just last week we saw a Gentile woman call Jesus "Lord" and "Son of David." But Jesus' own people were slow and reluctant to call Him such terms. Nicodemus called Jesus "Rabbi" — Teacher. So did many others. For a teacher He was. But who and what else is Jesus of Nazareth?

Therefore, Jesus then asked the big question of the twelve who had been with Him; who had heard it all and seen it all. Matthew 16:15, "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" This question is huge. It must be answered by everyone — including you and me. The problem in our time is that we've heard that Jesus is the Son of God. Yada. Yada. And so we can easily give that answer. He's the Son of God. But that's just what you've heard. The real question is: who do you — the real you — say who Jesus of Nazareth is? What do you truly believe in your inner being about Him? What answer to His question are you willing to stake your life on? Is Jesus real? Is He who they say He is? Is He who He says He is? Who do you say He is? What is He to you?

So here comes Simon's answer in Matthew 16:16, "Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'" I told you the name Son of God plays a role here. Only Simon uses it as a title commensurate with the title Christ, which is English for the Greek "Christos" which means the same as the Hebrew, Moshiach or in English Messiah.

Simon confessed with his lips and from his heart that Jesus is both Messiah and Son of God. Both these titles are hugely controversial. Modern Jews say that Jesus is not the Messiah. The Islamic Koran flat out states that God has no Son.

However, Jesus Himself rejected nothing Simon said. He received it and more than received it. For we read in Matthew 16:17, "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.'" Simon. Your answer did not come from your own reasoning. It didn't come from any discussion you had with your fellow disciples, or from what people say. It came directly from your Creator. And notice what Jesus says about the Creator. He calls Yahweh, "my Father." This thing just keeps on getting more complicated. For Yahweh Himself is complicated. That's what you would expect from "God."

So, Simon's confession of who Jesus is came directly from God. Indeed, theology says that such a confession has to come from God. Being conceived in Original Sin we're all born our own gods. And one thing about being a god is that our inherent godness doesn't broker competition from any other gods — most especially Yahweh. Therefore, Yahweh Himself has to come to our rescue. Scripture makes it plain that saving faith in Jesus can only come to us by the Holy Spirit revealing the truth of God's preached Word and His Sacraments and giving us a new birth.

But, it was the Father who revealed Jesus to Simon. Thus, Simon not only confessed Jesus as Messiah, He confessed Jesus as the Son of God — Yahweh, the Son. Simon the

fisherman may have been instructed in his youth about the passages of Torah that speak of Yahweh and the Angel of Yahweh acting as one. However, Simon's confession goes far beyond that. Yahweh has a Son who is Yahweh. This is part of the great mystery of Yahweh's Trinitarian nature — a mystery of Scripture denied by all Unitarians whether they be Christian, Jewish or Muslim. Yet, by a revelation from Yahweh the Father, Simon proclaimed Yahweh as Father and Son.

Now, if Jesus is Yahweh the Son, and owns the title, Son of Man, this means He is also Jesus, the son of the virgin Mary. Jesus is a true human being. The disciples testified to that. So, the doctrine of the two natures of Messiah is another great mystery that is despised and opposed by Christian heretics, Jews and Muslims. Indeed, it's just amazing how we humans refuse to hear what our Creator has to say about Himself. We'll easily believe all kinds of things we make up, but deny the truth that comes from Yahweh's own mouth.

Once, Simon confessed the man Jesus as the Son of God, it was time for Jesus to take various actions. We read Jesus' response in Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." These words are the reason we spent time at the beginning examining the geography of Caesarea Philippi. The city was built on a huge flat rock table with the cliff behind it. And in the cliff was the cave known as the Gates of Hades or the Gates of Hell.

So, several things here. First, Jesus gave Simon the nickname that comes out in English as Peter. Jesus probably spoke the name in Aramaic. It's Cephas — rock. The Greek equivalent is Petros — again rock — from which we get the English Peter. However, the name Peter is more literally, Rocky.

Why was Simon nicknamed Rocky? Several reasons. First, Peter's confession of Jesus came from Yahweh Himself. That's like solid rock. Second, there's nothing like solid rock to build on. So if Jesus is going to build His Church, there's nothing like solid rock — only this rock will consist of people confessing Jesus the same way Peter did. Third, because this confession came from the very depths of Peter, it is solid. It will endure Peter's denial of Jesus, Peter's absence at the cross, and more. This confession of faith is Rocky. Fourth, there's the rock on which Caesarea Philippi was built. It had been dedicated to gods and demons for millennia. With Peter's confession, Jesus swept all that away and established His Church on that rock. It would take centuries, but Christianity would finally be established in whatever remained of Caesarea Philippi in the 300's A.D., since it was then part of Constantine's Roman Empire.

And then, there were the Gates of Hades, the Gates of Hell. With His death and resurrection in an immortal body, Jesus conquered death. St. Paul tells us that death will be the last of Messiah's enemies to be destroyed, but it will be destroyed. All humanity will be raised from the dead in immortal bodies. Those who followed Satan knowingly or unknowingly in this life will follow him into the Lake of Fire, prepared not for humans, but for disobedient and rebellious spiritual beings like Satan himself. On the other hand, those who followed Messiah Jesus in this life will follow Him into the righteousness of the Kingdom of God with their sins forgiven by the atoning blood of Messiah.

Now, there's one other feature of gates. Gates don't attack anything. Rather gates are used to keep out unwelcome guests, and in the case of cities, unwelcome armies. So, in military terms, gates are defensive not offensive weapons. Therefore, it is Messiah's Church that will be on the attack against the gates and not the gates against the Church. And if the gates of Hell cannot prevail, it means that they will not be able to keep the Church out.

And this has been the case throughout history. The Roman Empire resisted the Church for nearly three centuries with brutal persecutions, but finally succumbed to it. Islam has tried to destroy the Church for fourteen centuries. It swept up many Christian lands into its maw. Islam is still desperately trying, even as the translation of its holy books into English is revealing the perverse doings of its supposed founder, and historical analysis is revealing its real origin as a Christian heresy. Russian Soviet Marxism spent 70 years teaching atheism and lost to Christianity. Communist China is again desperately trying to suppress the Church. It cannot succeed. For Yahweh Himself is the storm front that pulls His Church forward. No gate of hell can ultimately prevail against His onslaught. They all must eventually give way. Those that Yahweh intends to save will be saved. Period.

Now, finally we get to the weapon that breaks down all gates. Matthew 16:19, “[Jesus said,] ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’” To understand this verse, we compare it to what Jesus said to the apostles on Easter evening in John 20:22-23, “22... ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

The power to forgive sins is the Lord’s and His alone. The God/man Jesus did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. He humbled Himself unto death, even death on a cross. And for this courageous perfect act of atonement for sin, Yahweh raised Jesus from the dead and gave Him authority over everything in the universe. And this authority includes the power to completely forgive all human sin that has been repented of.

Therefore, all who have sunk into the sewers of shame, despair and guilt can call upon Jesus. All who have lived by violence and blood can humble themselves before Him. All who have shaken their fists against Yahweh for one reason or another can give up their false wrath. All who have simply lived normal lives as their own gods can appeal to Jesus for rescue from the Second Death that living as our own gods actually leads to. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as it says in Romans 3:23. None can justify their lives before their holy and perfect Creator. Before Yahweh, no one can stand without Jesus to freely justify their lives with His earned righteousness. That includes you and me.

But, here’s the catch. Jesus entrusted all His power to a fisherman He nicknamed Rocky. And in so doing Jesus entrusted the power to forgive sins to humans like Peter who can confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, as it says in Romans 10:9.

Do you know that any believing Christian can hear a confession of sin from anyone and grant that person forgiveness in the Name of Jesus? It’s true. If someone tells you a tale of squalor, woe and defeat, ask them if they want to confess this before the Lord and have it forgiven? Then lead them in a simple prayer of confession. “Father forgive me because I have done this or that evil in your sight.”

Now, if you make it here for confession, you say 1John 1:8-9 every Sunday. “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Have you memorized it finally? Well, you can say those verses to the person you just heard the confession from, and guarantee them that God means what He says and that their sins are forgiven. Yes. If you confess Jesus, you can do that. The reason I handle it in church is simply for the purpose of good order.

The keys that open the door of the Kingdom of God to those born again of water and the spirit is the forgiveness of sins. Jesus put those keys in the hands of His Church. That means you and me. The Lord has entrusted His keys into the hands of sinners like Peter, you and me. If I were God, I wouldn't do that. But that's what makes Yahweh God. He does things like that. He shows His glory, his power, by using sinners like us to pronounce His forgiveness over our fellow sinners. What a tremendous and humbling privilege.

Matthew 16:20, "Then he [Jesus] strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." As we'll see next week, this was because they didn't yet fully understand the work of Messiah. But if you know Messiah's work on the cross, the restriction doesn't apply to you. Go ahead. Openly confess Jesus as God the Son, the Messiah who takes away the sin of the world and restores the Image of God to all who believe. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.