

Sermon 8-30-26
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Gospel for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Matthew 16:21-28.

Agent Peter

In Lent of 2025 I preached a series of sermons in which I compared reading the Bible to watching a large screen rerun of the greatest contest ever held. Like anyone watching the rerun of a game, we already know the final score. Therefore, the purpose of watching a rerun is to break down the contest play by play.

This present earth is the playing field. On one side we have the kingdom of this world — the present world system in rebellion against its Creator — headed by Satan. On the other, we have the Kingdom of God — the Kingdom of the Creator of all that exists — headed up by no less than the Messiah — Yahweh, the Son. Who do you think is going to win?

But not so fast. Even though it's already clear which side is the winner, the final quarter of the game actually hasn't yet been played. The first three quarters have already been played and recorded so we can watch them on the large screen. But at the same time we're still in the contest. The final quarter is still being recorded and we're in it. Therefore, what we're seeing on the screen will actually play out in our personal eternal destiny beyond death.

The primary purpose of the contest is the recovery for humanity of what was lost in the contest's first minutes — the Image of God. The Image of God is the righteousness — the perfect goodness — of God reflected back to God in the creatures He's created to bear His Image. When Yahweh created Adam and Eve, He made them equal to Him in only one thing — perfect righteousness. In this way they bore the Image of their Creator God.

We all need to grab onto this word: righteousness. For, it describes the one characteristic by which our personal eternal destiny will be decided. On the Day of Judgment, those with the righteousness of God will populate the Kingdom of God — under the promised new heavens, on the new earth in glorious resurrected bodies that can never die. On the same day, those without the righteousness of God will populate the promised Lake of Fire — the place where the world system of rebellion can finally and fully max out. And such people will do so in resurrected bodies that can never die.

Now, since all of us are conceived and born in Adam's Original Sin, lacking the full Image — the full righteousness — of God, how can any of us ever enter the Kingdom of God? We will only enter with a righteousness not our own, but gifted to us by God. And the securing of that gift of righteousness is the contest we're watching on the big screen.

Just like the Image of God was lost by a man, it must be regained by a man. But that man cannot be any ordinary man — any ordinary sinner. He has to be one born without Original Sin so He can be truly free to choose Yahweh's righteousness alone and always. Unfortunately, those of us born in Original Sin can't do this. We're slaves to sin. We absolutely demonstrate this from the moment we're old enough to dishonor our parents by disobeying. That disobedience wasn't cute. It was deadly and the harbinger of much worse things to come.

So, this man, the Messiah, must be born without Original Sin and must never sin for His entire existence. However, this Messiah must endure temptation. For, without temptation, He cannot show His pure Love for Yahweh, the Creator God. He cannot show His undivided loyalty to Yahweh. Only by entirely resisting temptation unto His dying breath can He show Yahweh the kind of pure Love and undivided loyalty necessary to regain the Image of God for all lost sinners.

Now, because Messiah must be born without Original Sin, none of the temptations of this world common to people will affect Him. The usual sins — lust, greed, pride, sloth, dishonesty, seduction, slander and all the rest — will not affect Him in the least. Just like the original Adam, none of these will affect Him unless He can be convinced or deceived into giving up the Image of God. So, Satan didn't bother Jesus with the usual sins he bothers us with. He only bothered Jesus with the one really important sin — grasping at equality with our Creator. This is the sin at the root of all other sins.

Adam only had the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to deal with. Messiah Jesus had much more to deal with. He had the entire life-script of Messiah to deal with. And that life-script ended with the tree of the cross.

Messiah's life-script was originally transmitted to us by Yahweh — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — through Moses and the Prophets. And it was transmitted to us for one reason — so that we could know Messiah when He appeared, so that we could know Him by His life and work and thus, be able to put our faith in Him.

Now remember, we're watching a contest — the most important contest in the history of the world. It was a contest for the destiny of humanity. And that includes your destiny and mine. To win the contest, there were numerous things Jesus had to do. But there was one overarching thing that He could NOT do if He wanted to win. He could not grasp at equality with God. For grasping at equality with God is the one thing Satan did that made him Satan. It's the one thing Satan tricked Adam into doing by first deceiving Eve.

Satan's schtick is that we should not be content merely being equal to Yahweh in righteousness. Instead, we should be equal to Yahweh by having the right to be our own gods. We should have the right to design our own personal universe and live in it as we please. We should have the right to define our own "righteousness." We should have the right to define good and evil for ourselves and then live according to our definitions. In Philippians 2:6, Scripture calls this "grasping at equality with God."

Therefore, creating His own personal universe and living in it as He pleased is the one thing Jesus had to resist. Jesus had to resist creating His own life-script as Messiah. In order to reconcile the human race with Yahweh, Jesus could not repeat the sin of Adam. Jesus, the son of Mary, had to resist the ancient siren song of Satan at all costs.

The task Jesus had in this world was to stay obediently on script according to the life-script written for Messiah in the Old Testament. On the other hand, Satan's task was to pull Jesus off script. For, if Satan could do that as he had done to the original Adam, then Satan's rule over Yahweh's creation would be complete.

Now, there was no way Yahweh was going to allow that to happen. So, the result of the contest is a foregone conclusion. Satan loses. However, Satan is still going to get one corner of the creation to rule over — the Lake of Fire. All creatures, including humans, who love their Original Sin and desperately want to be their own god can follow Satan into it. All who hate, reject or ignore Yahweh, their righteous Creator, and want to be free of Him and His

bothersome purity and goodness forever will find their desire fulfilled there. Evil will reign through them all.

On the other hand, through Messiah, Yahweh has had great compassion on humanity. Although we are conceived, born and must live in Original Sin, we do not have to join Satan in the Lake of Fire. We do not have to become completely evil with him. There is an escape hatch into the Kingdom of God. And that escape hatch is Messiah Jesus Himself. But to become that escape hatch for us, Jesus had to resist the temptation to go off script unto His dying breath. He had to resist writing His own human script for being Messiah. He had to resist playing God — even though He is God. Figure that one out.

The New Testament gives us the great contest play by play. Immediately after being baptized for us with the baptism of repentance preached by John the Baptist, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the Judean wilderness for a forty day fast. At the end of it, Satan appeared to Jesus personally. He tempted Jesus with three unique temptations that were designed to pull Jesus off script. For our sake, Jesus successfully resisted them all.

Now, in all of Scripture, I can think of only two people to whom Satan personally appeared in order to tempt them. One is Eve. The other is Jesus. However, there are many people in Scripture to whom Satan didn't appear, but who obviously listened to him and carried out his will. And Satan used some of these as his agents to tempt others.

For instance, there is Eve. Satan didn't appear before Adam and didn't speak with him. Satan didn't have to. He already had ensnared Eve, and she became Satan's agent. We know this because when Yahweh rendered judgment against Adam, He began it this way in Genesis 3:17, "And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," . . .'" and then comes the judgments.

Scripture doesn't inform us what Eve said to Adam to get him to eat of the forbidden fruit. But, from what Yahweh said, it's clear she said something and she was persuasive. The problem was that whatever she said to Adam, it was directly contrary to what Yahweh had commanded Adam. Thus, Eve became Satan's agent.

Now, when Satan had failed to successfully tempt Jesus in the wilderness, we read in Luke 4:13, ". . . he [Satan] departed from him [Jesus] until an opportune time." And Satan never again showed up directly to tempt Jesus. Instead, he used agents. And just like Satan used the person closest to Adam, so Satan first used a man who was closest to Jesus — Peter.

Last week our Gospel text was Matthew 16:13-20, "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?' 14 And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 15 He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' 16 Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' 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. 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. 19 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.' 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ."

Last week we noted the powerful symbols of Caesarea Philippi — the huge bedrock platform on which the city was built, the cliff behind the city with the deep cave called the

Gates of Hades or Gates of Hell, and the ancient pagan worship at the location. We saw how with His action Jesus planted the flag of the Kingdom of God there and claimed it for Himself. But we also saw something very important to the contest. Jesus took the first step to prepare His team — the Church — to take the field for the fourth quarter of the game.

Jesus' closest friend, Simon the fisherman, confessed Jesus to be the Christ — the Messiah — and the Son of the living God. For this confession of faith, Jesus rewarded Simon with the nickname Rock, like the rock they were standing on at Caesarea Philippi. In case you don't know it, Peter means Rock. The nickname is literally Rocky.

But Jesus said something curious about Peter's confession. God the Father had revealed to Peter who Jesus is. As we'll see, the Holy Spirit is the person of the Godhead assigned to reveal to us who Jesus really is. Therefore, why did the Father do this for Peter? The answer is coming.

In any event, Jesus called Peter's confession of faith rock. He then said He would build His Church on similar bedrock confessions of faith in Him — confessions of faith from the heart. Then, Jesus announced that in the fourth quarter of the contest the Gates of Hell will not be able to prevail against His Church. The Church ultimately wins — at terrible cost. But the Church wins. For the Church will be on the attack. Gates are defensive weapons not offensive.

The Church will assault the Gates of Hell and eventually win. For, Jesus gave authority to His Church to bind and loose on earth in His Name. The Church has Messiah's authority to declare the forgiveness of sins to truly repentant sinners and loose them from the bonds of hell. The Church also has authority to declare to impenitent sinners that they are bound for the Lake of Fire if they don't repent. Throughout the 4th quarter the Church will struggle against the resistance. But, the promised win will finally come when Jesus steps back on the field at the very end of the game.

So, we come to today's Gospel. The event at Caesarea Philippi was crucial in the formation of Jesus' disciples. They were finally convinced that He is Messiah. Therefore, Jesus chose this moment to begin instructing them about the one aspect of Messiah's life-script written in Moses and the Prophets that He had not previously taught — the suffering Messiah. Thus, we read in Matthew 16:21, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

This news came to the disciples as a shock out of the blue. As we'll see in Peter's reaction, it challenged to the root a misconception about Messiah popular in Jesus' time — a misconception still popular today among Jews — that Messiah doesn't suffer.

Yes. Scripture unequivocally proclaims a victorious Messiah. But it also unequivocally proclaims that Messiah's victory must be won through His rejection and His personal suffering and death at the hands of sinners. Before Messiah can be victorious, He must suffer. He must suffer for humanity's sake.

So, here it comes. Matthew 16:22-23, "22 And Peter took him [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' 23 But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'"

Ever since Satan broke his creaturely bond with Yahweh and forsook the Image of God, the only way he's been able to think about the things of God is how to thwart them. It's interesting how Jesus accused Satan of setting his mind on "the things of man." In this case,

the “things of man” is a knowledge of the victorious Messiah that entirely rejects the knowledge of the suffering Messiah.

From a purely human viewpoint, then, the life-script for a suffering Messiah was the last thing in the world Peter wanted to hear. For, Peter had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah and had been given a great blessing in return. Peter had the greatest possible relationship with anyone in this world. Close to Jesus, Peter was as close to God as anyone has ever been able to get in this life. And to have it all taken away from you? Never! How can the Messiah that we’ve been waiting for be rejected and killed?

But even more important was the love and commitment Peter had for Jesus. Why would Peter want bad things to happen to a dear friend? NO. This can’t be. This can’t ever happen to you. Note what the inability to accept a suffering Messiah did. It made Peter plead with Jesus not to let it be so. “You can’t die. You can’t leave. Please don’t leave us. We love you” This was only natural on Peter’s part. It was so natural that Peter had no clue he was being used as an agent of Satan to tug on the depth of Jesus’ human emotions — Jesus’ great love for His disciples,

If Jesus had listened to the voice of Peter and had abandoned His road to the cross for the sake of Peter and the disciples, Jesus would have purposely re-written the God-written life-script of Messiah. In so doing, He would have grasped at the power to play God and all would have been lost in a way we can’t even begin to imagine. Therefore, Jesus resisted.

Scripture doesn’t say, but I wonder how Peter felt being called Satan. In any event, with His resistance, Jesus passed the first test of being tempted through those close to Him. He passed the first test of being tempted through an agent of Satan. Many more temptations remained — down to those who mocked Jesus saying, “come down from the cross and we’ll believe you.” Jesus had the power to do precisely that — to show ‘em all. But if He had done so, then He would have re-written His life script on His own authority and failed the test not to grasp at equality with God. For our sake, Jesus ignored the taunts and finished the suffering necessary to atone for sin.

Now, if you were raised in church the whole idea of a crucified Messiah is no big deal. It’s what Christians are taught about Jesus. But it is a big deal to the rest of the world. To rabbinic Judaism the idea that a crucified man could be Messiah is repugnant. Islam acknowledges Jesus in the Koran. But the Koran absolutely refuses to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God crucified to atone for human sin. The other religions of the world either ignore Jesus or make Him into some other kind of Jesus.

Indeed, the Apostles themselves had great difficulty with the idea of Jesus’ crucifixion. We saw Peter’s reaction. We also read in Mark 9:31-32, “31 [Jesus] was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.’ 32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.”

They did not understand and could not understand until Lord Holy Spirit was breathed on them. Only then could they understand both the suffering and victorious Messiah. This happened for the apostles on Easter evening.

In the upper room on that evening we read in John 20:21-22, “21 Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” In the same place on the same evening we read in Luke 24:44-47, “44 Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written

about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Jesus breathed Lord Holy Spirit on them and thereby opened their minds to finally understand what He had first taught them at Caesarea Philippi. The Father’s initial revelation to Peter had to be superseded by the Holy Spirit’s revelation in order for the full teaching of a suffering and victorious Messiah to be understood, believed and proclaimed.

And so, the full revelation of Jesus and repentance for the forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed to you and to me. If we say we have no need to repent because we have no sin, we are badly deceived and God’s truth is not in us at all. But if we confess our great need to be delivered from unrighteously acting as our own gods under Original Sin — then by the blood of Messiah Jesus we shall be forgiven, cleansed from all unrighteousness and made fit for the main event in life, the Kingdom of God. This proclamation is the work of Christ’s Church on the great playing field until Jesus returns. All those who can confess Jesus with their lips and believe in their heart that Yahweh raised Jesus from the dead have eternal righteous life in Him. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.