

On this Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

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When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Humanity is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by Abba in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. Matthew 16:13-18

In this season of Lent we are taking a journey and looking at images and stories about rocks and stones in the Bible. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and the tempter said - Since you are the Son of God, turn this stones into bread. Do it now, use your power, do your magic. Jesus responded – People do not live by bread alone, but by the words of God. Then last week Jesus saw a woman accused, frightened, with no cultural power about to be stoned for adultery, an act she did not do alone. Jesus - pausing, changing the fervor, speaking words to her accusers - said - Let the one without sin, who never misses the mark, who never breaks a promise – cast the first stone. They came as a crowd, they left one by one. No stones thrown.

Today there is a question about identity and there is a new name and there is a person whom Jesus says is like a rock who will be part of something new – *ekklesia* which means “church.”

Stones. Rocks. Heavy. Weapons. Beautiful. Symbols. Foundation.

I remember one of my early hikes on the eastern side of the Sierras. People had built dozens of cairns. The spindly stacks of stones, balanced precariously on boulders. Our group tried to build a few cairns of our own to add to the collection. Balancing rocks on top of each other is harder than it looks: with no perfectly flat surfaces, we struggled to find the right balance points. The stones slid and toppled. All our stacks tumbled over.

I imagine Jesus on the shore in Galilee, picking up stones washed smooth in the lake and setting them one on top of the other, trying over and over again until he finds the right fit. I think of his deep attention to creation, his patience and dexterity, as he eases the rocks into place, one and then another and another.

At a perilous moment in his story, just as he is squaring his shoulders for Jerusalem, Jesus asks the disciples a question: “Who do you say that I am?” Do they get it? Can they see beyond the

rumors in the crowds? Have the stones of his ministry begun to stack together in their minds, pointing them toward the anointed one?

One commentator said the verb tense in this question means Jesus and his disciples are having on-going conversations. That this is not a pop quiz. “Who do people say I am? As you enter into these conversations with people, what are you saying?”

It is Simon says, Here is what I have been saying. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus nods. “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah,”. In this moment Simon has been the one to put the pieces together. It is such a profound moment that it calls for a re-naming.

“You’re Rocky!” Jesus says, giving Simon the nickname he’ll keep forever, “and on this rock I will build my church.” *Petra* is Greek word for “rock.” Change your name, change how you see yourself. Peter was not always a solid rock. Sometimes a stumbling block.

Jesus was a carpenter, so he knew about building. In the Sermon on the Mount, he was clear that structures should be founded on solid rock, not loose sand. But Peter was no bedrock. He was more like the stones in the mountains —a little too lumpy, a little too rough, to balance anything without the whole stack tumbling over.

Yet Jesus used a rather uneven stone to start his stack - Peter - and he builds a community of God’s kin-dom here and now with rough stones like you and me. Centuries have proven just how unwieldy the living stones of the church can be. We’re pointy in all the wrong places. We wobble and shake. And yet, thankfully, God is practiced and patient. With grace, Christ finds our balance points. The unseen mortar between the stones is Spirit.

Our church, FPCSR, has not been meeting in our brick and mortar and wooden building for nearly 12 months because of the pandemic. We have been on a very challenging journey and have wondered about what it means to be the church when we cannot gather in person. As we begin to carefully discern our next steps, it is good to think about what we have learned.

- + There is a love of friendships rooted in Divine love that has sustained us as community
- + We found new and familiar ways to connect – Zoom, email, phone calls, texts, cards
- + We support our neighbors and listen for what is needed for wellbeing, food, housing, shelter
- + We ask deep questions about our spiritual lives – our inner lives in our solitude
 - In prayer, reading, reflecting, being attentive, being awake
- + We are wrestling with the challenging realities of racism and white privilege & finding ways to stand up for racial justice because each person is beloved
- + We are reading poems by Wendell Berry and paying attention to the small beauty in each day and taking action to protect the environment and addressing climate change

This past year has been a time of deep conversations on Sundays and Wednesdays. Sharing our questions about the Divine, about Jesus, about spiritual lives. **Who do you say that I am?** For some I sense this has been a season of movements of the Spirit – heart and head, body and soul – what is the Divine inviting us to see, to hold, to let go of, to receive.

Over the course of our lives, we probably encountered Jesus in the lofty doctrines of the church, in the grandeur of a stained glass window, or in a piece of classic art with a halo hovering over his head.

Following the ways of Jesus frames our spiritual lives in a different way. We look at the biblical stories of the first followers of Jesus like Peter who met him first of all as a human being. In their relationship with him there was wonder, there was awe, there was more than they could explain with the usual answers. Where did he get this extraordinary authority to speak with such boldness and conviction, words which were such a breath of fresh air? How was it that his prayer, his touch could bring healing to people who had no hope? How could he demonstrate a kind of compassion that could provide a community of acceptance for all kinds of people, so many of whom were excluded at all other places in that society?

Over these past 12 months we have read and discussed some new and some familiar books that have challenged us to re-think some of our theology about Jesus and help us articulate and live into a deeper experience of the presence of the God, Divine Love.

Who do you say that I am?

After reading John Phillip Newell's book and exploring Celtic Christianity maybe we would answer Jesus...

- ~ You are a deep expression and incarnation of Divine Love
- ~ You have come to reawaken us to our true nature. You are our epiphany.
- ~ You have come to show us the face of God and to show us our face.
- ~ You are the true face of the human soul. You are the truly natural one.
- ~ You are the one to remind us and help us remember that what is deepest in us is sacred.
You remind us that what is in the very heart of our being is of God.

Many in our congregation find the books and writings of Richard Rohr profound. How would we answer the question in light of Rohr's teachings?

- ~ Jesus, you are the union of human and divine in space and time. You show us that Christ is the eternal union of matter and Spirit from the beginning of time.
- ~ You are the visible map.
- ~ Cosmic and Universal Christ is a reality. We are your living body, which includes us and includes all of creation since the beginning of time.

"Who do you say that I am?"

Maybe our first response is not words. A mystery beyond words. Maybe silence. Breath. We continue to wonder, pray, read, reflect, notice, gather for worship and service with others.

As we consider our response, it seems to me that the study of the life of Jesus over the past two centuries can serve us, because it has helped us to recover the reality that the disciples first met Jesus as a human being, and were brought to the point of trying to express their extraordinary developing conviction that God, the Holy One, was somehow present, active, speaking, giving, healing through this human life.

What Peter and the other disciples confronted was the incarnation, the presence of Divine Mystery in the human, enfleshed. The challenge and the invitation is that we are of God, Divine in us, instruments of God's action. How do we grasp that theological reality?

I will close with a story that I first read in a sermon by Rev. Norm Pott, a beloved pastor of this congregation. This story arises out of the lore surrounding the Polish pianist, Paderewski. A mother wanted to encourage the progress of her young son at the piano and so she bought two tickets to a Paderewski performance. When the night arrived she found their seats near the front of the concert hall and they eyed the large Steinway parked by itself on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk with and she did not notice the boy slip away. When 8:00 p.m. arrived the house light dimmed, the spotlights came on, the Steinway was bathed in light, and only then did this mother notice that her son was seated at the piano bench, where he began innocently to plunk the keys in a rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

The audience roared, his mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski himself appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. "No, don't quit, keep on playing," he whispered to the boy. And reaching past him with his left hand the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato. The crowd was spell bound and the piece concluded in thunderous applause as the boy announced, "I didn't know I could do that."

That's incarnation. We are only human; purely human but by some miracle of grace, the Holy One is with us and uses us in the purposes of the kin-dom. God whispers in our ear, "don't quit, keep on playing," and as we continue, we are lovingly enfolded, graciously inspired, and from our humble efforts, something wonderful can emerge.

Jesus, the Cosmic Christ, comes to us across the years, yet still vividly, powerfully, beautifully, and the question remains, "Who do you say that I am?" We can build our spiritual lives like a cairn, rocks stacked, sometimes topple so it can be created anew. Today we need rocks and stones on which to stand and with which to build a vital, life-giving church in a post-pandemic world - rocks of love, hospitality, justice, hope, joy and healing. Let us continue to build our church on these stones and be willing to ask new questions as we follow the ways of Jesus.