

Scriptures: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

Moses

Earlier this morning we heard Joetta read about the birth of Moses and his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter. Have you ever really thought in-depth about this story? It's filled with irony. Pharaoh tells the Hebrew midwives to murder the baby boys as they're born by tossing them into the Nile River, but his own daughter finds one – adopts him, giving him the name Moses – and pays Moses' mother to take care of her own child. Isn't that part hilarious? And then Pharaoh meets his end when he hardens his heart and double crosses God, who uses Moses, to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt.

There are, of course, other things that we see when we really dig into that passage. We recognize racial prejudice, murdering of innocents, an effort of attempting to wipe out the Hebrew culture by killing the boys and keeping the girls – who would presumably marry Egyptian males, and produce Egyptian children. There is a lot to unpack under the surface of the text from Exodus. Anytime we study the Scriptures, there is always multiple layers to examine and unpack.

The Scriptures, in a way, are like an onion. At first glance, it seems to be rather ordinary, almost simplistic, but as you start digging into it, you begin to find all sorts of meaning and nuances – especially if you use a concordance and look at what some of the words mean in the original Hebrew and Greek languages! This morning's gospel reading, from Matthew 16:13-20, also has various layers of meaning, that we'll talk about today. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn there with me. I'll be reading from the NRSV this morning. **Read Matthew 16:13-20.**

What Do They Say?

Just before this gospel account, Jesus has had a run-in with the Pharisees and Sadducees. We've talked before, about how the religious leaders of the day opposed Jesus. This is nothing new. I find it very interesting, though, the way this particular passage opens. "When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'" (Matt. 16:13). Today, we'd be more likely to hear someone ask it this way: "What are people saying about me?"

Let's clarify something right now. Jesus isn't asking His disciples if people like Him, or how many views He's getting on Facebook – that's not what He's getting at here. He's not trying to find out if He's winning a popularity contest. He's getting the disciples to think. Notice also, how He refers to Himself – "the Son of Man." "And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets,'" (verse 14).

See, people were saying all sorts of things about Jesus. Some commentaries go so far as to suggest that some of the religious leaders of the day thought He was a resurrected John the Baptist. Apparently they hadn't been following Jesus on their Facebook or TikTok streams enough to see that Jesus and John that Baptist were cousins, and were born months apart from each other. Others thought He was a

prophet or holy man, like the great prophets of old – guys like Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and so on.

Not What They Expected

They thought Jesus was like the other guys God had used before to speak truth to His people, and who did miraculous things – like raise the dead to life. Did you know things like that happened in Old Testament times? Check out 1 Kings 17:17-24 sometime. God has always been in the miracle-performing business – of doing things which are impossible for people to do! Sadly, Jesus didn't fit "the mold," of what the religious folks thought "Messiah" ought to be.

They thought He would be a great conquering warrior-king, who would come along, and usher in a golden age of restoration to Israel. They wanted someone who would use His awesome power to completely wipe out the worst enemy they thought they had – the Roman Empire. They wanted a liberator who shared their religious proclivities and preferences. And Jesus, you know, He didn't fit into that box. So, they discounted Him. They said He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21). They said He was a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:19). He associated with sinners. He didn't measure up to their standards of what Messiah ought to be.

Even today, our society has multiple answers to this question. If you listen, you'll hear people say Jesus was a great teacher. That's true. He was – but He's more than just a teacher. You'll hear people say He was a great prophet, speaking God's word to God's people. That's true as well – He certainly qualifies as a prophet – and yet there's more to Him than that. You may hear people say He was a great preacher. He was – you see His teaching and preaching in the red letters of the Gospels, if your Bible uses them to show His words – but He was way more than just a preacher. People may even say He was a healer. He was – He miraculously healed lepers, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the mute – but He's so much more than a healer.

Who Do You Say?

Look what happens next. "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" (Matt. 16:15). Now the narrative shifts. Jesus knows, and has heard from His disciples who the people think He is. Now He wants to find out who the disciples think He is. These guys are His closest companions. They've been with Him since the beginning days of His ministry. They've seen Him teach, preach, prophesy, and heal multiple people. They've watched Him feed more than 5,000 men with only two fish and five loaves, and then have leftovers to spare. And they've seen Him walk on water, and even free a Canaanite woman's daughter from demonic possession. He does remarkable things – more than any other ordinary man could do. And so now He asks them, "Who do you say that I am?"

Can you imagine that? Being face-to-face with the Author of Life, looking into His eyes, and Him asking you – "Who do you say that I am?" It's a question He asks us even today. Who do we say Jesus is? That's a question with which every person – whether they follow Jesus or not – must wrestle. I think Peter answers it best, with his

confession of faith. “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,’” (verse 15). Peter seems to answer on behalf of all the disciples in this moment.

Peter knows Jesus is a great teacher, a great prophet, a great preacher, and a great healer. But he knows – in his guts – that Jesus is much more than that. He says, Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It’s interesting that Peter calls Jesus the Son of God here, when Jesus identifies Himself as “the Son of Man,” back at the beginning of the passage. I think the reason the Church came up with the liturgy is due, in part, to Peter’s confession.

Creeds and Liturgy

Today, we might say, we believe “in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hell. The third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”¹

Or perhaps we would say, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us and our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.”²

Both of these statements are found in our *United Methodist Hymnal*, in the “Affirmations” section in the back. The first one was from the Apostles’ Creed, which also shows up in the liturgies for the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. The second one was from the Nicene Creed, which the ancient church put together at the Council of Nicaea, after Constantine made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. These are our fundamental beliefs as followers of Jesus. That He’s fully human, and fully God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, that He lived a sinless life, was crucified for our sake on the cross, died, and resurrected three days later.

Taking Ownership of our Faith

The church I grew up in didn’t use any of the liturgy of the ancient church. I think I’ve told you this before; the denomination I grew up in split off from the Baptists back in the 1860’s or 1870’s, ironically as a “restorationist” movement – they claimed that they wanted to get back to doing things the way the ancient church did them. I’m not trying to bash anyone in saying this – I’m trying to get the point across that different denominations view things through different lenses – and I’m not saying one way is

¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The Apostles’ Creed, pages 881-882.

² *UMH*, The Nicene Creed, page 880.

right, and the other's wrong. That's not why I bring this up. I bring it up, simply to say that I didn't hear the Apostles' Creed until I was in college. And I didn't hear the Nicene Creed until I was in CLM Academy in 2013. People, in general, don't take the time to read them, or to use them in worship services. As true followers of Jesus, we must get into the daily habit of taking ownership of our faith!

Over the last decade or so, I've really come to love the creeds and the liturgy of the Church. In reading them, thinking about them, and opening my heart to the truths contained in them, I've drawn closer to God. That's the whole point of the liturgy – the ancient Church used it to bring our minds and wills into alignment with the mind and will of Christ. Look at how Jesus responds to Peter's confession of faith. "Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but My Father in Heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it,'" (Matt. 16:17-18).

There's a lot to unpack there! Jesus is saying that Peter's human faculties have not showed him that Jesus is the Messiah, rather, God the Father has equipped Peter to understand and recognize that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus renames Simon at this point, to Peter. We often call him Simon Peter – but up to this point, the guy's name, to use Jewish naming customs, was Simon Bar Jonah, or Simon son of Jonah (or John). Simon Peter is a later add-in to differentiate between him and the other Simon, Simon the Zealot. Peter is a translation of a Greek word for rock. If this were to happen today, or maybe 40 years ago, rather than Peter, we might have Rocky – like Rocky Balboa.

So Jesus is saying here, that Simon, son of Jonah, is the rock on which He will build His Church. Of course, we know, "the Stone the builders rejected has become the chief Cornerstone," (Psalm 118:22). Jesus is the foundation of the Church! This is the first time that the Church is mentioned in the Bible. The passage seems to suggest that Peter has been given a leadership position among the disciples by Jesus' statement. Jesus goes on to say, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," (Matt. 16:19).

Holding the Keys

Our passage closes by saying that Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah," (verse 20). It wasn't the right time to tell all God's people that Messiah had come. We know, we've already talked about this – that Jesus wasn't the Messiah they expected, or wanted, to get! I want to talk just a bit more about Peter, and the Church.

Peter was executed by the Roman Empire in the early 60's AD. In Roman Catholic tradition, his burial site became an important landmark of the faith. In fact, St. Peter's Basilica, the largest Roman Catholic Church in the world located in Vatican City, Rome, is built on top of Peter's supposed tomb. The first church was built there in 330 AD while Constantine was Emperor. Setting aside any biases we may have

towards the Roman Catholic Church, the symbolism is striking. The largest Christian church building in the world, which hosts upwards of 80,000 people in its square during masses, stands upon the remembrance of Peter the Rock's death. It really is a visual reminder of Jesus' promise – that the gates of Hades – of death, will not prevail, and the community of those who follow Jesus Christ will continue because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And He keeps His promise to build His Church!

If you know Church history, you know that the Great Schism around 1000 AD, ended the unity that the Western Church and the Eastern Church enjoyed. Roughly 500 years later, Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in Europe, further fragmenting the Church. Jesus created the Church to be the vessel to represent Him, and carry the Gospel to all the world. The Church consists of people – like you and me, who aren't perfect. When I say "perfect," what I mean is, we are very capable of making terrible mistakes! But, when you read John Wesley, we're called to live in "Christian perfection" – meaning that we are to love God and people with all our being. We rarely live up to that standard, even today – you see the wide variety of denominations, and non-denominational churches around which provides ample evidence that "like draws to like."

Today, the Church is tasked with an awesome responsibility. Holding the keys of the kingdom, or as we might say it now, knowing – and telling, the greatest story the world has ever heard. That old story, of the God who knew there was no escaping death for the people, unless He rescued them. And so, in the depths of His profound love for us, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be born of a virgin, to live a blameless life, to die a death He did not deserve as an atoning sacrifice on our behalf, and on behalf of the whole world. Jesus died for us. He rose from the grave three days later. And right now, He sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding – praying – to the Father for you and for me, by name! Our God truly is an awesome God! Amen.

Prayer: Almighty God, as You have sent Jesus to be for us light and truth, send now Your Spirit upon us to grant us grace and strength to follow in His footsteps this day. Amen.