

“The Wise man Built His House upon a Rock”

Matt 16:13-20

Pr. Sarah Semmler Smith

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Trinity Lutheran Church

When I was preparing to graduate from high school, my parents were preparing to move out of the house I grew up in and build their retirement home. One afternoon, my mom was sorting through things in the garage when I heard her call to me, “Sarah, do you want to hold on to these?” I couldn’t see her but I could tell she was smiling. So I went out to see that what she was talking about. When I saw what she was holding, I said “Yeah ma, that’s exactly what I need in my 10 by 10 dorm room next fall.” It was a gallon ice cream bucket, full of *rocks*.

For a short time as child, I collected rocks. I wasn’t a *rock collector*. I could not tell you the difference between an obsidian and a quartz. My rock collection was a hodgepodge of the most ordinary, mostly granite, most of them from landscaping rocks you had ever seen. I kept one because it was speckled and I found it pretty. Another because of how it felt in my palm. They had no value to be looked at. By my mom had kept them for nearly a decade. She saw that they had been, for some reason, extraordinary, to me.

Rocks (or a rock) is a theme at the center gospel story this morning. Who that rock is, what his role will be, and how it affects us is what we’re going to spend a few minutes pondering.

The story is actual set in a somewhat rocky place--Caesarea Philippi –a region that had many stone temples built to Caesar and also to the Greek god Pan. As they are going along in this rocky region, Jesus is inspired to ask his disciples what people are saying about him. “Who do people say that I am,” he asks. “John the Baptist” “Elijah” “Jeremiah” they say. “All good things, all good things” (like unpaid interns reporting poll numbers to their candidate).

But Jesus wasn’t interested so much in the climate of public opinion as the temperature of his disciple’s faith. So he goes a step further: “And you, who do you say that I am?”

Simon, the fisherman turned disciple spokesperson, speaks up: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

And I imagine them walking along as they talked, but at this Jesus stops. And he gets that look on his face that a mixture of surprise/pride (familiar to a parents of young children) – at this un-prompted answer, so profoundly dead on. And then Jesus proclaims: “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.**”

Talk about a gold-star; a-plus; interviewing-for-internship-walking-out-as-executive VP-moment. Jesus is pleased with Simon's response to say the least. By Matthew's account, Jesus then and there gives Simon a *nickname* Peter.

We think of Peter as a common name, today. And yet, there were no documented instances of anyone ever being named Petras, which means, "Rock" in Greek or Aramaic prior to Jesus and this nickname he just gave Simon. I guess it makes as much sense as any nickname ever does to those outside the immediate context. Maybe Jesus knew the song "The wise man built his house upon a rock." (Matt 7:24)

But was Peter, Rocky—the best choice Jesus could make, for his house? Looking at his record, Jesus could have given him this nickname for any number of reasons:

- 1) *Rocks sink*—Peter was the one who tried and failed to walk on water to Jesus, when it was said about him, sinking-- "you of little faith."
- 2) *Rocks also trip you up*—and Peter was the one whom Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me."
- 3) I've never heard anyone say, 'So and so is as *'smart'* as a box of rocks' – Peter would end up denying Jesus three times in the span of as many hours before the cross.
- 4) But what Jesus also knew was that rocks—for all their faults-- are also critical Foundation –Firm. Strong. In Jewish tradition the Jerusalem temple was built on a rock thought to be the center of the world, the present site of the Dome of the Rock. Rocks are necessary solid bedding to build anything of worth upon, and despite what else he lacked, Peter, Rocky, was solid in this: he gets who Jesus is and the power there-in.

"You are the Christ, the son of the living God," he declares. This understanding of Peter's? Was a gift. Not something you solve as in a math problem, or decipher as from putting together pieces of a puzzle. That kind of knowledge comes when God, for a moment, decides to pull back the curtain, and revealing something of Godself. Peter, fisherman, sinking, stumbling Rock—for some reason is the one gifted with the knowledge and bone-deep conviction that the Jesus who stood before him was as much of God as we ever hope to see. And he said it out loud.

Jesus, for his part, recognizes that Peter grasps what is un-teachable. Peter *gets it*, who it was in front of him, and this made Peter uniquely open to receiving the power of the living God. Jesus says, I've got a job for you. "You are Rock, **on this foundation I will build my church.**"

It's interesting, that the word "church" (or ecclesia) is used by Jesus only here and one other place, not just in the book of Matthew, but also in Mark or Luke or John. In all of the gospels, Jesus is recorded using the word "church" just twice. Jesus, rarely talked about church! When he did, he wasn't thinking of little white Ebenezer Lutheran or picturing the Crystal Cathedral, or even buildings with such fine architecture as this. The church was not a building to Jesus.

When Jesus used the word church/ “*ekklesia*” (Greek) he was thinking of a word which meant ‘called out’ and was used for local political assemblies. Jesus co-opts that word here for a new purpose: to designate the renewed people of God (the same covenantal people of YHWH) who would begin to gather and to love others and to pray in the Way of Jesus. The church was people. More than a fellowship of like-minded individuals who have formed a support group. The church was to be a community united by the very confession that we hear on Peter’s lip’s today: that Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God.

That confession, is either ludicrous, and we can ignore it and get on with our lives. Or, it is true, a game changer. When you pray and follow a *living*-God, that opens up the possibility for unique things to take place. Namely, for even very different individuals to nevertheless combine their gifts, to make a difference in ways previously impossible. The church would be and is—a distinctive gathering of people ‘called out’ of themselves, and into fellowship with one another and service of the world, in Christ’s name.

Jesus says: “I will build my church **and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.**” The gates of Hades. Hades, here, is not a place of punishment. It is not a place of eternal torcher for those who did bad things. Hades, simply, is the realm of the dead. So what Jesus is saying, is that the realm of the dead, which no human being can conquer, is nevertheless not stronger than the church founded on the rock. Why, because it was Christ’s church from the beginning, and *he* was going to be doing the building-- giving the church strength for good despite the forces of death arrayed against it.

This morning, we sit here knowing the gates of hades, the forces of death too well. We see them on nightly news; watch them unfold in our community; know them intimately in our own struggles and those of our friends and family. And yet the Holy Spirit continues to bring us together--gatherings of 300 hundred or 30 or 3--who confess this ludicrously mysterious creed: that Jesus is the messiah, the son of the living God. A group who gathers around this truth, is a kingdom and power counter to the kingdom of death. One that –with Christ, will always win in the end.

It began with one “Rock”—who got it. At present there are 2.2 billion Christ-followers around the globe. A random collection of rocks, not much to look at, we become extraordinary as God’s spirit collects us together, builds us up, and gives *us* a new name. Where who were individuals, we are Trinity, we’re the E.L.C.A. Part of something truly good and exciting. Greater than we ever could be on our own. Built up into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are the church. It seems the wise man did build his house upon a rock after all.

Amen.