***SIMON PETER: WHY ME?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Matthew 16:13-23 and Acts 10:34-48

When I was in high school Miriam Therese Winter was a Catholic nun who sang with a group called The Medical Mission Sisters. She wrote most of their songs and had several successful ones including two that are in our new hymnal. One of the songs we sang (or hummed along with) at youth group gatherings and church campfires has stuck in my memory over the years – while a lot of other things are fleeing from my memory. The song is “God Loves a Cheerful Giver”, and the first stanza is this:

*Peter always made a fuss. Peter was impetuous.*

*He knew hard times when he denied his Lord.*

*But hardly had he fallen when he got right up, began again*.

*Christ named him his successor as his reward.*

That stanza seems to capture the essence of who we remember Peter to be from all the Gospel accounts – bold, fiery, fussy, impetuous, fickle, but resilient. He wears his heart on his sleeve, but sometimes his brain seems disconnected from his mouth. He says what others might be thinking but are not bold – or foolish – enough to utter. The passage we read from Matthew’s Gospel this morning is a great example of Peter at his best – and worst – at about the same time.

Jesus and the disciples had just arrived in the district of Caesarea Philippi, a beautiful city on the southwest slope of Mount Hermon 40 miles northeast of Nazareth. With the mountain towering 8000 feet above it, the city is perched on a terrace 1150 feet above sea level and looks out over the fertile north end of the Jordan Valley. It was a predominantly pagan city with strong roots in Greco-Roman culture, and the city held significant sway over the area immediately around it.[[1]](#endnote-1) It was in this Greco-Roman city, not in more strongly Jewish Jerusalem or Galilee, that Jesus posed this curious question to his disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

*Son of Man* is one of those titles by which Jesus was known and a title he claimed for himself, according to the Gospels. While it can refer simply to a human being (the son of a man) it also can have messianic overtones. It is this latter understanding that Jesus claims as his self-identity, for “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” is another way of phrasing the question, “Who do people say that I am?” It is doubtful that Jesus had not heard the rumors, but he wanted the disciples to voice what they had heard – “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Of course they were all dead and gone! The best guess of those who had seen or heard or heard about Jesus was that he was a prophet in a great line of prophets, perhaps even a resurrected prophet! It had been centuries since Israel had heard from a true prophet of the Lord, and so it was no small thing to suggest that Jesus belonged in that prophetic line and an even greater claim to suggest that he was the living, breathing version of a long-dead prophet.

Jesus’ real purpose in posing the question to the disciples was not to take a survey of what people were saying, but to set up the question that followed: “But who do you say that I am?” The fact that the question begins with “but” suggests that he expects a different answer from the disciples. In contrast to the word on the street, these disciples have followed him, listened to him and watched him perform miracle after miracle; they should know better than anyone who he really is. It is Peter who is quick to answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is Peter’s bright shining moment. There is no hesitation, no parsing of words, no hedging of bets. It is surely a statement from the heart, because Peter is not a statement- from-the-head kind of guy! It is a bold declaration of faith that speaks for himself and the disciples and the Gospel-writers and generations of saints to come: Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the living God!

It is at moments like this that we all wish we were a little more like Peter or at least had the faith of Peter, the faith to boldly and without hesitation say what is divinely and eternally true and get it right. That is what we wish, but what is the reality? If Jesus were to ask, “Who do you say that I am?” what would you say? Who do you believe Jesus is, and who is he to you? Those are fundamental questions of Christian faith, questions with which people have been wrestling for two thousand years. Jesus is more interested in a statement-from-the-heart kind of response from us than a statement-from-the-head answer. He wants to know what you really believe in your heart, in your gut, in the core of being where faith lives. Who then do you say that he is?

These days you are apt to hear answers like *a good person, a prophet, an example to follow, a wise teacher, a miracle-worker*. And all of those would be right, but none would be enough. For, what Jesus wants to hear from us, from the depths of our hearts, is that affirmation Peter made: “You are the Messiah, Son of the living God!”

You are *Messiah* – the one long promised by God to come and deliver God’s people.

You are the *Son of the living God* – bearing the authority of a divine Creator and Sustainer who continues to be with us and active in our midst.

All those other descriptions could be true of a host of humans across history, but Peter’s declaration alone embraces divine promise and hope, for it alone expresses confident trust that we experience God’s power to save us uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ.

Peter got it right, according to Jesus. He got it right, not because he was smart enough to figure it all out, but because God had revealed this to him and had stirred his heart to share it and declare it. The reward for that faithful revelation was a new role and a new name for this disciple who had been known as Simon. “I tell you, you are *Petros*,” said Jesus, “you are Peter, and upon this *petra*, this rock, I will build my church.” It is a play on words that suggests that Simon’s new name will reflect his new role – the rock! In reflecting on that new name for Peter, Frederick Buechner writes:

*A rock isn’t the prettiest thing in creation or the fanciest or the smartest, and if it gets rolling in the wrong direction, watch out, but there’s no nonsense about a rock, and once it settles down, it’s pretty much there to stay. There’s not a lot you can do to change a rock or crack it or get under its skin, and, barring earthquakes, you can depend on it about as much as you can depend on anything. So Jesus called him the rock, and it stuck with him the rest of his life. Peter the Rock.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Jesus did indeed call Peter a rock, and he may well have meant all those solid attributes of which Buechner writes, but it seems to me that Peter is also kind of a slippery rock, the kind of rock that can be difficult to get a grip on, the kind that can be a little precarious to stand on and may cause you to bang your shin from time to time. It is the kind of slippery stone that doesn’t quite get it right all the time, the kind of rock that

calls Jesus Messiah and then chastises him for saying he will die,

wants to be first to walk on water but then begins to sink for lack of faith,

refuses to let Jesus wash his feet until Jesus says he must, and then insists Jesus wash his whole body,

follows Jesus to Pilate’s court after his arrest, only to deny even knowing him not once, not twice, but three times in just a few hours.

If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then he is a rock that has its share of flaws, cracks, imperfection and slippery spots – like the rest of us. It is not that Peter intentionally flaunts God’s will as David did, but sometimes he just doesn’t seem to get what Jesus is talking about or understand what God has in mind. No sooner is he commended for his statement that Jesus is “the Messiah, Son of the living God,” then he is hailed by Jesus as Satan for denying that Jesus should ever suffer and die and be raised on the third day as Jesus said he would. While Peter is a rock, at times he is also what Jesus calls “a stumbling block”, so intent on earthly things that he misses the divine things. Or as someone has phrased it, “he can be so earthly minded that he is no heavenly good.”

Yet, even at such times, Peter never gives up, never throws in the towel and quits, never abandons his call as a disciple, never sits and sulks when Jesus chastises him, never bad-mouths himself for his errors. In the words of that song from my youth, “*hardly had he fallen when he got right up, began again”.* That is resilience! That is perseverance! That is faithfulness! It is upon such a faithful, resilient, yet flawed rock that the church was built. In the passage in Acts we read this morning we hear Jesus’ choice vindicated as Peter gives a rousing defense of the Gospel and opens the door to welcome Gentiles into the waters of baptism.

God does great things through Peter, chipped and flawed as he is. If God can do such great things through him, then perhaps God can do great, or at least good, things through us – even if we are imperfect, even if we don’t always get it exactly right, even if our faith and faithfulness waiver from time to time, even if we don’t fully grasp the intricacies of faith, even if we get discouraged. But if God is to use us as God used Peter, then we must persevere as Peter did. When we falter and fall, and we will falter and fall from time to time, we must pick ourselves up and begin again, knowing that our God is a patient God, the God of new beginnings, the God of new chances, the God of new hopes – for Peter and for us. Amen

1. “Caesarea Philippi”, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, , Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1982, p.480 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1979, p.134 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)