

September 10th, 2017 Matthew 16:13-20

Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come.

Can you picture Stonehenge, one of the 7 wonders of the medieval world? It's a structure of 93 stones set up in a circular pattern out in the middle of the English countryside. The stones are up to 30 feet tall and weigh 25 tons. You can probably picture it? But I'm willing to bet that no one in here has any idea what the purpose of Stonehenge actually is. They are bunch of stones sticking up in the air and no one knows what they're actually for or what their true meaning is. There's plenty of guesses and theories, but the true meaning has not survived through the years. They are stones whose meaning died. They are stones without a confession.

Our lessons for today speak of stones that still bear their confession. 12 stones set up by Joshua to serve as a memorial to the people forever. What do these stones mean? They mean God's people crossed the Jordan on dry ground. God preserved his people! Then in the Gospel lesson, Peter, a man whose name means "little stone or rock," gave the confession of faith that is the bedrock of the Church. "You are the Christ!" The bedrock confession of Peter still has its meaning, because its meaning is founded on Christ. Confess the Christ, the Son of the living God and the Rock of the Church.

We heard in the text that Jesus comes to the region of Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. Now there are two cities called Caesarea in the Bible and this is the one mentioned less frequently. The other one is down by Jerusalem, but this one is way up in the northern part of Galilee, which is the northernmost point of Israel. This is a city which is dedicated to the worship of the false god Pan. It's at this pagan idol-worshipping city that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?", "Some say John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." These answers are pretty illustrious guesses. Everyone of these men were faithful prophets of God. But these answers reveal something: the people aren't thinking of Jesus the Son of Man also as Jesus the Son of God. They are thinking of him as just another one of the prophets, a good teacher, but they don't know who he truly is.

Then Jesus asks the disciples, who had been with him now for 3 years, "But who do you say I am?" And Peter steps up right away and speaks for all of them, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God." "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah, the Anointed One." "You are the long-awaited Messiah who was promised all the way back in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned. Now you are right in front of our eyes. You, my Jesus, are the Son of Man, born of a woman, but you are also the Son of the living God. You are the Son of the God who has been present from eternity and is still living today. You are the Son of the living God, not some shrine or fake idol like the people are worshiping in Caesarea.'

Jesus is overjoyed to hear this answer, this rock-solid confession of faith. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah!" Blessed are you Simon Peter that you have this knowledge and belief in who the Son of Man is. This surely was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, by people or your parents, or something you just picked up along the way. This confession was revealed to you by my Father in heaven. Blessed are you Simon, for you believe that I, Jesus, am your Savior.

What an amazing confession of faith Peter made there! And don't we wish that we were always standing right there with Peter to boldly proclaim, "You are the Christ!" But now maybe

we pose Jesus' question to each of us? "Who do you say that I am?" Not just, "Who do you say I am when you're at church on Sunday?" Then it's easy to say, "You are the Christ! Right? Who do you say that I am during the rest of the week?... "Jesus, you are great but I have a million other things to do at work right now!" "Jesus you are the Christ, but the game is on right now, I don't have time! Or, "Jesus you're a good teacher, and your teachings are a good guide for my life but do I really have to follow them all the time?"

Often our confession doesn't match up to Peter's confession here. But Peter's sinful flesh and blood often came forth too. He wasn't always such a strong confessor either. Think of the night when Jesus was arrested, the night before he was crucified. Jesus was before the Chief priests and some people from a crowd saw Peter and began to question him, "Weren't you with Jesus of Nazareth?" And what was Peter's answer, "No, no, I swear I don't even know that man!" and he called down curses. Three times they asked him and three times he denied Jesus!

That sounds a little more like us in our daily lives doesn't it? Our mouths are a little too full of our biting sarcasm and our nasty words to be giving any sort of confession of faith. Or when someone actually does ask us why we go to church or why do I want to become a pastor? Do I boldly declare, "Because Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and he is my Savior." Mmmhh, no... it's usually more of a mumbling bumbling answer that really doesn't give any confession at all. This is the sinful nature that lives inside us, the condition that all of us were born with. The sinful nature living inside of us does not believe that Jesus is the Christ. The sinful nature is hostile to God, it hates Jesus and it rejects any idea of a Savior.

Peter's great confession certainly did not come on his own, from his sinful nature, "but this was revealed to you by my Father in heaven. That truth was given to him by grace and is also given to us in the same way. The Father sends his Holy Spirit to create faith in our hearts. As the pages of Scripture are spoken and read, God works faith through the power of his word. He reveals to us the promises made and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As the water of Baptism is applied to a baby in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he writes a confession in the heart of that child, "You are the Christ." As the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are truly received in the Lord's Supper, God inscribes deeper into our hearts, "you are the Christ, who takes my sins away!"

The Father made this Peter's confession and he makes it your confession! You are the Christ, who being the very Son of God, came to this earth and became a man for the sake of sinners. You are the Christ who was ignored and rejected back then and still today, and yet you willingly laid down your life for us, even when we want nothing to do with you. You are the Christ who fulfilled all the Father's promises, and by doing so, restored us from death to life. You are the Son of the living God who came to bring eternal life for us. "You are the Christ" Peter confessed by faith, and by grace this is most certainly our confession also. **Confess the Christ, the Son of the living God.**

Peter's confession said it all, he hit the nail right on the head, and drove it home. But the fact that Peter was the one making the confession isn't the part that matters. The part that matters is the one he confessed, the object of his faith. **Peter confessed the Christ, the Rock of the Church.**

Jesus used a really interesting pun in his answer to Peter. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” I mentioned earlier that Peter’s name is (Petros) which means a little rock or stone, a pebble. The word Jesus uses when he says, “on this rock” is (Petra), which sounds very similar, but this word means massive rock, bedrock, or even like a mountain. So Jesus is saying, “You Peter are a little rock, but this confession you made is a massive bedrock, and on this rock-solid foundation of your confession I will build my church.” Peter, your confession of me, the Christ, is a firm foundation, and immovable object. What is built on the rock is firm and secure, the rock is unshakeable.

“I will build my church on this rock and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” What are the gates of Hades? Hades in the bible is the word for hell. So when we hear that phrase, “the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” we can think of two different facets, the offensive side and the defensive side. The defensive is probably what comes to our mind first, that the powers of sin and hell are lined up assailing the church constantly. And all the while Christ protects the Church which is founded on him. The forces of evil will never prevail against the Rock, which is Christ.

That is most certainly true, but don’t forget the offensive side. The Church also makes its charge against the forces of evil, armed with the Gospel of Christ, the sword of the Spirit. And as the Church storms the gates of hell, preaching the good news to all creation, Jesus’ promise rings true. “The gates of hell will not prevail against the Church.” The Gospel will always go out and the power of sin and devil cannot hold it back!

Maybe you’re thinking, “Man, there is so much opposition to Christians all the time. It definitely feels like we are on the defensive. It feels more like powers of hell are bombarding us and gaining more ground all the time.” It’s easy to get discouraged by it all, it’s easy to let our confession go silent. “I don’t want to talk about religion with my co-workers, they’ll think I’m some sort of Jesus freak.” “I don’t want to invite my friends to church, cause that just makes everything awkward.” It’s much easier if I just go about my business and don’t bring that kind of stuff up.

Those kinds of thoughts assail us all, and Jesus’ promise to us is two-fold, defensive and offensive. He protects the Church, he protects us, from every attack of the devil. Just as he preserved the Israelites as they crossed the Jordan on dry ground, so he preserves his people to this day. The Church is built on him and will never be destroyed. Sometimes, it may feel like Satan is gaining ground, but he will never be victorious. He will never knock the Church off its solid ground. He may inflict massive casualties and he might win battles here and there, but it is as sure as the very words of God. The Church will endure until our Lord Jesus returns.

And now remember the offensive side of the promise. As you confess the Christ at work, at school, during that awkward situation, as you invite your friends or coworkers to church, Christ stands with you by your side, and under you, holding you up. As you proclaim the gospel in your family and in your own circles, Christ is your rock and he leads the charge with his word. As your life and actions bear testimony to your faith, you are witnessing to Christ. As you speak words of forgiveness to a brother or sister who confesses a sin, know that you speak with the authority that Christ gives to forgive sin. The Gospel, which is yours by faith, will go forth with the power of Christ, as you confess his name in the world around you.

So what does your memorial stone say, what is your rock-solid confession? It's not like Stonehenge, a bunch of 25 ton rocks that don't mean anything. Your confession is the bedrock, Christ the Son of the living God. You confess Jesus, the Savior from sin, and this confession was not written by you, it was chiseled into your heart by God the Father in heaven. Speak the words that were written on your heart with the authority that comes from God himself. **Confess the Christ, the Son of the living God and the Rock of the Church. Amen.**