

Riverside United Church
March 3, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 16: 13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17And 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.

18And 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.

19I 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."

20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Wandering Heart: #3 - Praise the Mount"

Our family cottage was built in 1968 and the 24 by 28 foot building was built on a series of cement blocks that sat on the red clay ground of the Northumberland shore in Nova Scotia. One of the late spring/early summer activities each year would be the work that my father did to re- level the cottage due to the freezing and thawing of the ground. Dad had a hydraulic jack that he would use as he crawled and wiggled under the cottage and adjusted the blocks by adding boards or rocks to the top of the blocks. My job was to hand him rocks or boards or the level, etc.

At some point in the 55 year history of the cottage, before I had to do that job by myself, it was put on a more sound foundation, one that was poured cement and it has not shifted as much with the frost and thaw cycle of each winter. It has been awhile since anyone has had to wiggle under the 12 -18 inches of crawl space. The cottage is much more securely mounted on the foundation.

Over the past couple of weeks this neighbourhood has heard the operation of pounding piles for the new apartment/residence building on Brookfield Rd. In a conversation, with staff of Brookfield High school, one of them said that we haven't just heard it, we have felt it. This work is so that a solid foundation will sustain that building.

In our scripture lesson today, we hear Jesus declare to Peter that he will be the rock upon which the church will be built. What qualities did Jesus see in Peter that would prompt such a declaration?

In this Lenten season, we are reviewing the character of Peter as he learns and grows as a follower and disciple of Jesus. The theme of this series is Wandering Heart in recognition that Peter's heart & mind wanders around in this learning and growing process. We get the impression that he is someone who thinks out loud, so we hear and can imagine more of the process of absorbing and comprehending what Jesus has invited him to be.

The creators of this Wandering Heart resource have based the weekly themes on the lyrics to the hymn Come O Fount of Every Blessing. One of those lines is: "Praise the mount; I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unfailing love." As I have been thinking about this line and phrase, I have had the mind set of the image of mountain and the common biblical understanding that the Holy was most known on the mountain. A few weeks ago, we heard the story of Peter going up the mountain with Jesus and experiencing the mystery and wonder of the transfiguration.

In our Tuesday morning discussion of this story and the Praise the Mount phrase, another interpretation was offered. It was suggested that maybe the mount was like a foundation - that which we are mounted on or fixed upon and that gives us the courage and grace to be who we are.

This image or understanding of "praise the mount" has resonated with me so much more than the mountain in the distance image. And it fits the part of this story, when Jesus declares that Jesus will be the rock upon which the church is built. The church will be mounted on the example and witness of Peter.

Now before we get carried away with putting Peter on a pedestal to be worshipped, it is important to remember that Peter did not personify perfection as a follower of Jesus. He did personify a variety of responses that are part of what it means to be a human being seeking to grasp the fullness of the God's nature and being. The wandering heart of Peter has a sense of honesty and integrity to it and that is a model that helps us to know what it means to be a disciple.

Peter shows that the mount upon which we are fixed is not wind proof or storm proof; it is not a guarantee against suffering or difficulty or stress or grief. But, in being mounted upon and in the love and grace of God, then we have more strength to withstand the upheaval and shifts of our living. We are more anchored by the foundation of story and truth that is eternal.

And that anchor and foundation is important in a context where there is much that challenges us to determine our values and our priorities. And if Peter is the rock for the church, then we know that there will be some wondering in determining how we learn and live out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

The gospel story that we heard today is set in Caesarea Philippi and that name probably doesn't mean a lot to us. In the time of Jesus, the Roman empire was expanding and there were Greek influences affecting the region. Caesarea Philippi was seen a bit of a cosmopolitan city where Greek and Roman influences mixed with the Jewish way of being and thinking. So, it is in this multi-cultural, multi-religious place, that Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And Peter offers a variety of ideas - John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Elijah - one of the prophets. In the midst of diversity of thought and values, it was an important question to take the temperature of thought.

In our context today where we live with neighbours of various faith or no faith traditions, it is important for us to think about who Jesus is. And there are a variety of responses that we could give - teacher, friend, saviour, healer, rabbi, bread of life, light of the world, the Way, shepherd, sacrificial lamb, the true vine, the miracle worker, the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, the Resurrected One And all of those are names and images for Jesus that have biblical sources and may be part of our understanding of this fascinating breakthrough figure of Holy Love. If we were to go to a variety of churches, we would hear a variety of these names and images emphasized and others ignored. There have been hundreds of books and articles written about who Jesus was and is. A lot has been written in the response to the question, "Who do people say that I am?"

But that question was only the warm up to the more important question to the disciples. Jesus then asked, "Who do you say that I am?". And Peter responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." I

wonder what the other disciples would have responded. Would they all have had a turn in answering? And I would imagine that their responses might have been different from one another. There may have been a variety.

As that question has been asked down through the ages, there have been a variety of responses and emphasis in response. This has caused division and conflict in the church, but if we make the answer to this question too simple or if we demand that everyone memorize the same response, then we limit the fullness of mystery that we are invited to follow and to be the foundation for our living

On Thursday at noon hour, I was part of the Being an Invitational Church lunch and learn program that our cluster of churches is offering. The theme for this past week's discussion was re-imagining the goal of evangelism. We named that evangelism is a concept that has been tainted for many of us. But, evangelism means sharing good news. We had a conversation about what would be good news in our present context. What would be good news for our friends and neighbours? We talked about community and hope. One of the responses to that question was "It's good news that we don't all have to believe the same thing."

It is important to praise the mount that we are fixed upon - but that doesn't mean that the foundation of our faith can't withstand some shifting and growing as we deepen our understanding of living in love and hope. Jesus taught us to love God with all that we are to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Love is the foundation and our comprehension of it expands, evolves and stretches, loosens and binds as we encounter a variety of experiences and people. Our faith can stretch and grow, loosen and evolve as we wrestle with doubt and conviction as we find frameworks of truth that hold our experiences and our questions.

One of the questions that we ponder each Tuesday morning as we meet to discuss these stories of Peter is "What question would you like to ask Peter about this story?" And one of the questions that I would like to ask Peter about today's focus reading is: "How would your response to Jesus' - who do you say that I am? - question have changed as you continued the path of discipleship? Was it different in the courtyard when the rooster crowed? Was it different that early morning when the women came with news from the empty tomb? Was it different when you encountered the mystery of the Risen presence on the beach?

We know that even though Peter was named as the rock, that meant that his wandering heart continued to seek and figure out all that was going on. He was not given the fullness of mystery. The rock upon which the church is built is not a book of doctrine, but a relationship of commitment and love: God to Peter and Peter in return to God. God to us and our response in return to God. And the foundation of that relationship is the Holy Energy of Love that is at work - even when we can't always see or recognize it. Let us be mounted to - and strengthened by - that love. Amen.