As you may know, Lent is my favorite season of the church year. It is the 40 day period from Ash Wednesday to Easter . . . but Sundays are not counted. It is a time of reflection and prayer and sacrifice and service, remembering the journey that Jesus made to Jerusalem where he faced punishment, humiliation, torture, and death on our behalf. I urge you to spend these days well as we prepare for Easter.

During Lent this year I would like us to grow in our faith by considering some very important questions. In fact, I am calling them “essential” questions ~ questions about life and faith. This morning we start with the question that is foundational to understanding the Christian faith: “Who is Jesus?”.

Let’s set the background for this story from Matthew’s Gospel. (You can also find this story in a greatly abbreviated form in Mark 8:27–30 and Luke 9:18–21)

At this time in the life of Jesus, he knew that he must go to Jerusalem and face the religious authorities. He no doubt knew that he would be walking into the time and place of his death. Possibly in his humanity Jesus wanted to know if his message was getting across to people. Did they understand what he was trying to teach them?

So, Matthew tells us that Jesus and his disciples came to the city of Caesarea Phillipi, he asked them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

Now, “Son of Man” is the title Jesus had been applying to himself up to this point. It was Jesus’ preferred way to refer to himself, and the title appears 84 times in the four Gospels.
The disciples were ready for this question. They knew what people were saying. Some were saying Jesus was John the Baptist; some said he was Elijah; some said Jeremiah; and others said he was one of the prophets.

Interesting what the people were thinking about, isn’t it? All these men were dead, so it meant they believed he was their reincarnation or that they had come back to life. All these were forerunners of Christ:
- John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus’ ministry by preaching repentance and baptism;
- Elijah was considered the prince of all the prophets and this is a high honor for Jesus to be named in his company;
- Jeremiah was another giant in the prophetic realm;
- And then there were various other prophets named among the people.

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

How would you answer that? What is your answer after believing and then following Jesus? Be careful what you say!

It was Peter who answered that question. Peter, the big fisherman called to follow Jesus. Peter, who was impetuous. Peter made the grand confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

What did Peter mean by that? “Messiah” is a Hebrew word which means “chosen of God”. It is the same as the Greek word “Christ”, which also means “chosen of God”. Peter was saying that he believed that Jesus was divine and had been chosen by God to save all of humanity from their sin.

A remarkable confession of faith! Is that your confession, too? Is that what you would say?

And with that confession, Jesus knew that his work was safe and that at least some knew who he really was.

“God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am.” (MSG)
The great New Testament scholar Dr. William Barclay, says this: Our knowledge of Jesus must never be at second hand. A man [or woman] might know every verdict ever passed on Jesus; he might know every Christology that the mind of man had ever thought out; he [or she] might be able to give a competent summary of the teaching about Jesus of every great thinker and theologian - and still not be a Christian. Christianity never consists in knowing about Jesus; it always consists in knowing Jesus. Jesus Christ demands a personal verdict. He did not ask only Peter, he asks every man [and woman]: “You - what do you think of me?”

So, you; what do you think of Jesus?

What Jesus says next has caused no small amount of confusion and disagreement and debate. Hear again what Jesus says next, and for clarity I am reading from the New Living Translation (NLT):

“Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Let’s look at the reference to “rock”. There is a play on words here. In the Greek language, nouns have gender, masculine and feminine. Jesus says to Peter, you are “rock”, using the masculine Greek noun petros. Now, remember that it was Jesus himself who gave him that name “Rock”. His name was Simon, and in John 1:42 Jesus says he will be known as “Cephus”, which is the Aramaic word for “rock”.

And then Jesus says he will build his church upon “rock”, using the feminine Greek noun petra.

So, what do we make of this? I have always thought of the conversation going like this: Jesus, pointing to Peter, says, “Peter, you are a rock.” And then, Jesus points to himself and says, “Upon this rock [me] I will build my church.”

But in my current reading and study, I am seeing another way to interpret these words of Jesus. Maybe Jesus is saying that Peter in fact is the rock in a very special sense. Since Peter was the very first disciple to understand the truth about Jesus as Messiah, he becomes the first stone of many over the centuries which will build the church
It is as if Jesus is saying, “Peter, you are the first man to grasp who I am; you are, therefore, you are the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the Church which I am founding.”

Peter never forgot what the Lord said that day. When he wrote his first letter, he tells the other believers that they, too, are a rock. He says, And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What’s more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. (1 Peter 2:5, NLT)

Every one of you who receives the claims of Christ on your life and follows him is a living stone in his spiritual temple.

The other part of what Jesus said to Peter has also been controversial. Jesus said to Peter, “And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid [i.e, bind] on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit [i.e., loose] on earth will be permitted in heaven.”

What did Jesus mean by that?

Keys indicate stewardship. In ancient times, the steward of a house opened the doors in the morning and closed them at night. Jesus foresaw stewardship responsibilities in Peter’s future. Peter’s ministry in the early church would literally open the doors of salvation to many who might otherwise not be invited to believe the gospel.

On the day of Pentecost, for example, recorded in the second chapter of Acts, Peter rose to preach and 3,000 souls walked through the open door to receive Christ as their Saviour. It was Peter, in Acts 10, who went to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile Roman soldier, and used the keys to open up the Gospel to Cornelius and his family and the entire Gentile world.

Later, in Acts 15, a church council was convened in Jerusalem to take up this matter of Gentiles being welcomed into the church. In large part, the testimony of Peter was influential in the decision to allow Gentiles to become Christians without first having to become Jewish. Again, the keys to the kingdom were wisely used by Peter.
And those keys are in my hands and in your hands today. Look at our mission statement: we are to go and make disciples. We are to go and use the keys to open the door for other believers to come in and to know Christ.

So, to sum up and to paraphrase what Jesus told Peter, listen to what Jesus said:

“Peter, your name means a rock, and your destiny is to be a rock. You are the first man to recognize me for what I am, and therefore you are the first stone in the edifice of the fellowship of those who are mine. Against that fellowship the embattled powers of evil will no more prevail than they will be able to hold me captive in death. And in the days to come, you must be the steward who will unlock the doors of the Kingdom that Jew and Gentile may come in; and you must be the wise administrator and guide who will solve the problems and direct the work of the infant and growing fellowship.”

All of this because Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?”

So, how about you and me? Who do we say that he is? Be careful how you answer that question.


Let us pray together:

He became sin, who knew no sin
That we might become His righteousness
He humbled himself and carried the cross

Love so amazing, love so amazing

Jesus Messiah, name above all names
Blessed redeemer, Emmanuel
The rescue for sinners, the ransom from Heaven
Jesus Messiah, Lord of all

His body the bread, his blood the wine
Broken and poured out all for love
The whole earth trembled, and the veil was torn

Love so amazing, love so amazing,

Jesus Messiah, name above all names
Blessed redeemer, Emmanuel
The rescue for sinners, the ransom from Heaven
Jesus Messiah, Lord of all

All I hope is in You, all I hope is in You
All the glory to You, God, the light of the world

Jesus Messiah, name above all names
Blessed redeemer, Emmanuel
The rescue for sinners, the ransom from Heaven
Jesus Messiah, Lord of all.11

Amen.
1. Caesarea Philippi was an ancient Roman city located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon, adjacent to a spring, grotto, and related shrines dedicated to the Greek god Pan. The city is now uninhabited, an archaeological site in the Golan Heights. See www.wikipedia.org

2. See “Son of Man”, by Dr. John Polhill, in Holman Bible Dictionary, Edited by Trent C. Butler, www.studylight.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?n=5959. 1991. (Dr. Polhill was my Greek professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, in the late 1960s.)

3. See Dr. William Barclay’s Daily Study Bible, Matthew 16, p. 3. I use a PDF version which I purchased from Software Sharing Ministries in Juneau, Alaska, some years ago.


7. Aramaic is a Semitic language. According to Wikipedia, “It is generally believed that in the 1st century CE [Christian Era], Jews in Judaea primarily spoke Aramaic with a decreasing number using Hebrew as a native language. Many learned Hebrew as a liturgical language. Additionally, Koine Greek was an international language of the Roman administration and trade, and was widely understood by those in the urban spheres of influence. Latin was spoken in the Roman army but had almost no impact on the linguistic landscape.”

8. See the scholarly article by Matt Slick, “Is Peter the rock on which the Church is built?”, found on the website of Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM), http://carm.org/is-peter-the-rock.


10. This is a rendering from William Barclay, in Daily Study Bible, cited above.