

“Rock Solid”

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For Bethany United Church's 171st Anniversary

John 11.31-36

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When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

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

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

Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Matthew 16.13-20
(New International Version)

Jesus had taken those first disciples a long way. They were a long way from where they had started, a long way from where they were at home. Jesus was taking them to the unfamiliar and foreign. Maybe he was doing this because when things are unfamiliar, we can see more clearly who we are, and who Jesus is.

Today, we are remembering 171 years of Christian community, worship and mission as Bethany Church. Imagine what it was like in the 1840s. Bethany was a brand-new start-up, a spiritual home in our community. Those pioneers had journeyed a long way. They had arrived from English shires, from Ireland and Scotland (some though Venezuela), even Switzerland.

In our congregation's 1993 history book, it says:

They knew nothing about bush life, and had it all to learn. Few of them had any money, and the nearest settler was ten miles from a mill. There was not a road of any kind but

*merely a track through the bush.*¹

Those early Bethany disciples of Jesus came into surroundings that were unfamiliar and foreign. Soon after, led by Jesus, they started a congregation. It is when we are in places that are unfamiliar, that we can sometimes see more clearly who we are, and who Jesus is.

Now, here we are, disciples of Jesus in this place. For those of us who've spent our lives in congregations like this, some things are the same. Many things have changed. Jesus leads us into unfamiliar places and situations. Maybe that is because, when we are a long way from where we started, when things are strange and foreign, we can see more clearly who we are, and who Jesus is.

II

Let's go back to those first disciples with Jesus, in the Scripture reading.

Jesus takes them to Caesarea Philippi. That is on the northern border between Israel and Gentile territory. Unlike Pilkington, Caesarea Philippi isn't wilderness. It is a big capital city for King Philip. He is the son of King Herod, from the Christmas story. Herod received the city from Caesar Augustus (also from the Christmas story). When Philip inherited it from his dad, he renamed it: Caesarea to honour the Emperor, and Philippi to honour himself.

Caesarea Philippi lies at the foot of Mount Hermon, the biggest chunk of rock in the whole region. Inside the city is a huge stone temple to the Greek god Pan, and a huge stone temple to the Syrian god Baal, and a huge stone temple to Emperor Caesar.

Jesus takes his tiny band of disciples there. It is when things are unfamiliar, that we see more clearly who we are, and who Jesus is. There, he asks them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Jesus often called himself that.)

They rhyme off a list of great prophets. People are saying that Jesus is like them.

Jesus then looks right at those first disciples (and maybe us) and asks, "But who do you say I am?"

With Mount Hermon in the distance, and temples worshipping the power of mighty gods and worldly powers in the background, Simon, a small-town fisherman, doesn't tremble

¹ Jane Robertson, Bethany United Church 1843-1993, page 1.

under the mountain. The temples, their gods and powers do not intimidate him. He looks at Jesus. His eyes blaze with realization and wonderment. He says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

When things are unfamiliar, sometimes we see more clearly.

You, Jesus, are the Messiah, the One we've long-expected, the One who will free God's people from those worldly powers and those lying gods. You, Jesus, are God's Son, the revelation of who God truly is. You, Jesus, are the Answer, the Point, the Last Word, the Meaning of it all."²

III

We'll get back to our Bethany, but let's stick with these first disciples a bit more.

Simon recognizes who Jesus is. It's not because Simon has figured it out. It's not because he has seen the many signs. It's not because he knows the Scriptures. Simon realizes who Jesus is, because God the Father has shown him. God gives us the gift of Jesus, and God gives us the gift of seeing him, trusting him, and following him.

Simon recognizes who Jesus is. This changes who Simon is.

Against the backdrop of the big mountain, Jesus says to little Simon, "You are Peter." (That means "rock.") "You think that mountain rock is big? You are the rock on which I will build my church."

Against the backdrop of those stone temples, monuments to worldly powers and gods, Jesus says, "The gates of Hades will not prevail against it, this church I will build on this rock." Hades was an ancient name for the place of the dead. What can be stronger than death? "You think those stone temples are big? You are the stone on which my church will stand."

Notice, Jesus does not say to Simon, "You are Peter, and you're going to build the church." Peter's job is not building the church. Our job is not building us. Jesus builds us.

Notice too, Jesus would not need to build his church strong, unless it will come under

² Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 149f and Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2. Revised and expanded edition. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1990 and 2004), 122.

threat. He knows storms will come, trying to destroy what Jesus builds. So let's not let the storms surprise us. Remember, Jesus builds strong.³

Notice also, Jesus builds on Simon only when Simon points to Jesus and says "You are the Messiah!" Peter's job is not to build the church. That's Jesus' work. Peter's job is not to make it strong to withstand whatever might come against it. The church's safety, security, or future existence is not Peter's responsibility. That's Jesus' work.

Peter's job is simply to point to Jesus, and follow him. Keep pointing, keep following. The Jesus-pointing, Jesus-following Peter is the rock.⁴

IV

Let's think again of those pioneer disciples, who came to Pilkington township. They were in a place that was unfamiliar and foreign. Maybe that helped them to see more clearly who they were, and who Jesus is. They saw that they were people of God in this place. They saw that Jesus builds his church. Because of their trust in God, they were open and eager for what God was doing among them. And Jesus built them into a congregation.

Congregations come and go. They are born and reborn. No single congregation is Jesus' church. All of us together are. All congregations, around the world, are Jesus' church. Our Bethany congregation is part of the church that Jesus is building.

Now, we are here. We are disciples of Jesus in this place. Many things have changed. Jesus has led us into unfamiliar situations. Those pioneering disciples are not here. Their time was their time, and this time is our time. This is the time God has placed us in. This is the time God is calling us to be Bethany in.

In this time, can we see who we are? Are we Peter? Peter's job is not to build the church. That's Jesus' work. Peter's job is not to make it strong to withstand whatever might come against it. That's Jesus' work.

In this time, can we see who Jesus is? If we are Peter, then our job is simply to point to Jesus, and follow him. Keep pointing, keep following.

And keep trusting Jesus, to build rock-solid on us. To the glory of God. Amen.

³ "By making Peter the rock on which the church will be built, Jesus indicates that the church will need to be so built because hell itself will try to destroy what Jesus has established." Hauerwas, 150.

⁴ "It is not Peter's task to make the church safe and secure or to try to insure its existence. Rather, it is Peter's task to keep the church true to its mission, which is to witness to the Messiah." Ibid.