

Who Is Jesus and Who Are We In Christ?

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Matthew 16:18.

In today’s lessons, we will explore the questions of who God is, Who Jesus is, who we are and what difference it makes. I also hope that we will have a clearer idea of what we believe and what we should give witness to in our words and in our behavior.

A seventeen years old young man was preparing to go off to a logging camp to make money for his senior year and to get ready for college. Upon helping him pack, his mother wondered what her son would be like when he returned. She knew that at such logging camps there was a lot of cussing, drinking and wild things that went on. Her son was a leader in his church’s youth group, soft spoken and religiously very responsible. How will he be changed? Off the young man went to the logging camp. The summer went quite quickly for the youth, but it was a long one for the mother. More later!

I. Who is God in Moses’ Time?-Exodus 1:8-2:10.

In our patriarchal episodes, we have arrived at the time of Moses. We last left the Israelites having settled in the fertile land of Goshen, Egypt under a friendly Pharaoh. Now the political climate has changed. A Pharaoh who felt threatened by the proliferation of the Hebrew people for political and military reasons had come to power. He enslaved the Hebrews and then tried to reduce their numbers by the destruction of all newborn Hebrew males. Orders were given to the Hebrew midwives to let all of the boys die and to the Egyptians to throw them into the Nile river. Little did he know that out of the mouth of the Nile river and hidden in his own household would come the Hebrew deliverer he feared.

After being hidden away for three months, a baby boy of a Levite couple was set afloat on the Nile among the reeds near where Pharaoh’s daughter took her bath. As destined by God, the daughter of Pharaoh found him, was enamored with him and made him her son, naming him Moses, meaning in Hebrew *“I drew him out of the water.”*

Moses was of the sixteenth generation from Abraham through the Levitical line. He was the first great Hebrew deliverer and priestly prophet. Today’s lesson sets the stage for the continuation of God’s promise to Abraham through descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. The moral of the story is that God will fulfil God’s purpose even when the political, military and economic climates are not favorable. The irony is that when Pharaoh told the midwives to destroy the Hebrew boys at birth, the births had already taken place when they arrived. When Pharaoh told the general Egyptian population to throw all newborn Hebrew males into the Nile, the Nile produced for him an adopted grandson who epitomized the very thing he feared—a slave deliverer. What’s at play here is a clash between an earthly empire and the kingdom of God. The question is, “How shall an empire rule and what happens when that empire clashes with the will of God? So, God is, therefore, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi and Moses. Moses is one link in the chain of God’s transformation of the world into God’s image.

II. Who is This Jesus of Nazareth?-Matthew 16:13-20

At Caesarea Philippi, we come to a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. The public ministry is at an end. He turns now to instruct the inner circle to prepare them for the mission ahead. The work of the Christian formation of individuals, communities and the world will require a close community with instructions and discipline in the faith and practices of the kingdom of heaven.

Here in the shadow of the center of several religions, Jesus raises two questions and answers another one that is not asked. Caesarea Philippi was the place where the Syrian Baal was

worshiped, the birthplace of Pan the God of nature, and the center of the emperor worship. Here was also a sacred site for Jews. They believed that the Jordan river had its source in a deep cave.

Jesus asked his disciples, *“Who do people say the Son of Man is to be?”* Matthew 16:13. They answered, *“Some say John the Baptist, but other Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets,”* Matthew 16:14. Herod Antipas feared that John the Baptist had returned from the dead. Jews still today at their Seder place a chair and a cup of wine at table and open the doors for the return of the prophet Elijah. Others believed that Jeremiah, having hidden the Ark of the Covenant, will return with the Ark before the Messiah comes. And still others were saying that the Son of Man would return as one of the other great prophets.

Public opinion or academic discussions about the Son of Man or Jesus for that matter would not suffice, therefore, Jesus asked his disciples a more poignant question, *“But who do you say that I am to be?”* Matthew 16:15. Simon quickly responded, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Matthew 16:16. Simon, evidently, did not fully understand what we know and believe today.

We believe that the Messiah or the anointed one is God incarnate, the one who teaches us about the kingdom of heaven and what true humanity was meant to be. He is God with the power over the elements, the source of all creation, one who sacrificed his life for us at Calvary and the one who rose victorious over sin, the devil and the grave on Easter morning—*“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”* said Simon.

Jesus told Simon that he had answered correctly. The public opinion question and the personal impact question were the only two that were asked by Jesus, but he answered another, one that is existentially germane to all of us, *“Who was Simon to be or who am I to be in relationship to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God?”* Jesus said, *“Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”* Then Jesus answered the question that was on the minds of Simon, all of his disciples and should be on our minds, *“And 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?”* Matthew 16:18. Peter, the disciples, you and I are the foundation stones upon which Jesus builds his church. What an awesome responsibility and privilege that is! But Jesus goes further. *“I will give you the keys to 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.”* Matthew 18:20. Here is a pronouncement in Matthew’s gospel that is awesome in its impact for the church. It is second only to the Great Commission in Matthew 20:19. For Matthew, the church has been given the responsibility and the authority to extend the kingdom of heaven to the ends of the earth. There is no time to be tentative about our mission and ministry. We do not have the luxury of playing church or of fighting among ourselves. The task is clear and the time for kingdom building is now!

Finally, Jesus admonished the disciples to keep that information secret. For just as Moses was hidden away for three months, placed in a basket and floated on the Nile and reared in the secret recesses of the house of power itself (Pharaoh’s palace), so too, God’s kingdom is and was secretly growing like the tiny mustard seed placed in the earth or the leaven hidden in a lump of dough. Jesus said, *“And 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.”*

III. How Shall The Foundation Stones of Christ Behave?-Romans 12:1-8

In today’s epistle, Paul admonished the Roman Christians not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to and to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. He pleaded with them not to be conformists with the world but rather to be transformers of the world by the renewing of their minds with what is good, acceptable and perfectly aligned with the will of God. As Christians, peer pressure and keeping up with the Joneses, must not be the things that guide our behavior. We should witness to our faith by example and word.

Then Paul gave the Christian in the Roman empire advice as how to behave with one another. They are to use sober judgement according to the measure of faith given to them by the Holy

Spirit. They are to exercise their gifts according to the grace each received. He then listed seven functions within the body of Christ and how they should be fitted together: prophecy according to the portion of faith received; ministry according to the service needed; teaching according to the instructions necessary; exhortation according to the advice required; giving according to the rule of generosity; leadership according to the guidance needed and compassion, shown with a cheerful heart.

This mostly gentile church in the Roman empire was not familiar with the moral and ethical restraints of Judaism nor the Gospel of Love brought forth through Jesus Christ. They were part of the Roman empire and empire ethics and morality ruled their lives. Now, through baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they were being adopted and engrafted into the church. Like Moses who was reared in the ethics of Pharaoh's empire, they would have to have the fires of a burning bush to burn away the chaff of empire ethics and engraft God's new Torah-the Gospel. Like Peter and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, they had to learn who Christ was, to be transformed by that knowledge and become the solid rock foundation upon which the church in the world is built.

In today's lessons, the covenant promise falls upon the baby Moses who is miraculously saved from death, given protection as the adopted grandson of Pharaoh and reared in the atmosphere of both the empire and the kingdom of God. Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, not only asked his disciples about his identity, but told them to build his church upon the foundation of their profession and belief about his messiahship. And, Paul challenges the Roman Christians to live lives of religious purity, working together as they used their Spirit-filled gifts for the spread of God's kingdom.

Now back to our summer logging youth. Finally, the young man returned home in time to get ready for his soccer team. His mother looked at him and saw that many things had changed about him. The boy she watched walk away from her in May was now physically a man. Muscles bulged from his shirt and thighs. There was a full mop of hair upon his head, a mustache and beard on his chin. His voice was deeper, but his countenance had not changed. "How did you make it son?" "What do you mean?" he replied in his deep voice. "How did you survive among all of that swearing and drinking?" "Quite well, mom," he said "I just did not let them know that I was a Christian?"

Let us pray. O God who saved and called your servant Moses to be the great deliverer of Israel, who places upon our shoulders the spreading of the kingdom of God and who expects us to make our bodies living sacrifices acceptable to you: Help us to hear your call to us, to live lives of holiness before one another and before you and to dedicate our lives to the total service to all human kind, as we become good stewards of the world with which we have been blessed . We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.