

Sermon – 12th Pentecost

Matthew 16:13-20

August 23, 2020

“This Gate is Closed”

Imagine this scene. Jesus walks with his disciples in the yawning hours of the day. No especially large crowds this time as evening settles in, just Jesus and his inner circle assessing the day and the prospects for tomorrow. They are far from home – to the upper limits of the physical boundaries of Israel, 40 miles north of the Sea of Galilee in a town called Caesarea Philippi – built by the Jewish Governor Philip, brother of the infamous King Herod, to honor Caesar Augustus. The town Philip built lie only 4 miles from the ancient Jewish city of Dan where, nearly 1000 years earlier Israel’s King Jeroboam erected an altar with a golden calf and introduced pagan worship to the Jews that would persist for centuries.

Jesus and his entourage pause to rest. As they sit beside the road, heads start to bob from the combination of fatigue and the advancing hour. Jesus breaks the silence: *"What are people saying about me?"* The disciples looked at one another, waiting for someone to answer. One of them speaks up, buying time as much as seeking clarification by asking *"What do you mean?"* *"Who do the people say that I am"* Jesus says with emphasis. *“We’ve been hearing John the Baptist, Elijah, a few Jeremiah or some other prophet."*

After another silence Jesus asks, "*Who do you say that I am?*" But this time there is hardly any pause – Peter bursts out with, "*You are Christ, the Messiah of God.*" He looks Jesus in the eye, while the others stare off in the distance, to the next town where their supper and a night's sleep are. Scanning their faces, Jesus returns his gaze to Peter and breaks the silence a final time, "*Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.*" No one says a word. Try to imagine Peter's face...flush with pride...red with embarrassment...wide eyed in reverence...hard to know.

What most of the other men know is its too far into the day for conversations like these. But to a man, everyone had to know that Jesus was in a different mood this night - he had other things on his mind besides how the next town would treat them or what miracle of healing someone would ask of him and whether such would engender anything more than a burst of faith and popularity offset by the rising contempt many were holding him in. Jesus is going much deeper this evening – deep into his people's history, even past Jeroboam's decision to stake Israel's fortune on the gods of the Canaanites instead of the God of Abraham and Moses.

He's thinking origins and the place the Bible calls 'Eden' – and human rebellion against God and how quickly the decision of a man and a woman to decide life for themselves became worship of the self. Just outside Caesarea Philippi, perhaps near where this conversation took place was a cave and a spring of water – a good place for road weary travelers to pause.

The locals believed it to be haunted and the Greeks and Romans believed it to be the dwelling place of the god Pan – so they erected a bunch of temples by it. The cavern from which these waters flowed was so deep and so spooked the locals that the entrance of the cave became known as “*the gate of hades...hell*” for our purposes. It may have been there that Jesus told Peter the confession he’d just made would be the foundation upon which Jesus would erect his church and that gate would be closed.

Things are accelerating in the gospel of Matthew now. Miracles and healings are giving way to death and resurrection predictions – weighty stuff. Within days of this conversation Jesus would be transfigured on a mountain near Caesarea Philippi – Mount Hermon just to the north or Mount Tabor a little to the south. Then its off to Jerusalem to show what God meant when he said on that transfiguration mountain “*this is my Son...listen to him*” and therefore what it means for a person to call Jesus “the Christ”, their Savior and their Lord. On this evening, on this road, by these “gates of hades” Jesus was looking back to the beginning and forward to eternity and how what he was about to do would “loose the power of sin” forever - making a simple confession the means for us to be so loosed. Eden...Jeroboam...the current compromises of Herod...the future failures of even the church...all swept under a promise...the gates of hades shall not prevail.

You sit here today the product of events and circumstances in your history that have shaped you for good and for ill – decisions you wish you could decide over – thoughts, words and deeds you hope never see the light of day. You have come through the simple life lessons of childhood. You’ve survived the learning lessons from the playground and the lunch line.

You're a teenager right now - then you are learning about loyalty and fragility in relationships, you are finding out what your values are, you are being schooled through lessons about reputation and peer pressure. They'll have an effect on you. You are young man or woman right now. You are discovering the truth of the saying that to be a child is to not know or be concerned about the cost of things. But to be a young adult, on your own, in college, in a first career, in the first years of marriage means you have to balance more than your social calendar, you have to balance a budget.

You are the adult whose career is full of promise or conversely the one who wonders why you are still doing what you're doing. You're maybe in that spot where you wonder if making and just as quickly spending money is all your life will amount to, and it makes you wonder about priorities in the middle years of life. You're in retirement and wonder why you miss your kids and your work like you never thought you would. You're old and know your Christmas card list gets shorter every year and it crosses your mind that sooner or later yours will be the one crossed off.

You're all part of a community that has changed in the last six months and it won't be back to normal for quite a while. If you're young you've had to learn about disappointment - an altered if not ruined summer. If you're old and "vulnerable" as they say, you've learned that home may be safe but not always where you want to be. The sheer number and pace of decisions you all face tires you and is starting to show. Though we humans have enormous reservoirs with which to store stress, frustration, boredom or hurt, eventually they surface, in trickles or torrents. It can be a humbling or worrisome thing when that happens...no one likes to "*spill over*".

Picture in your mind's eye an evening at a place called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus looking at an ancient cavern whose dark waters bubbled up from the deep - "the gate of hades" they called it – folks for miles afraid of it even while some built temples in a vainglorious attempt to pacify it. Jesus punctuates the stillness asking to no one in particular a question everyone must answer "*who do you say that I am*" - and his gaze turned to the face of a single confessor – a erratic one for sure – with Peter we're in good company, but a confessor of Christ.

On the strength of that confession Jesus said the "gates of hades" it's past and any future it entertained are finished – we've nothing from it to fear, its accusations and seductions swallowed up by forgiveness and grace - blessed is the one who it's shallow promises does not pursue. "*Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God*" indeed! AMEN