



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 12TH PENTECOST
MATTHEW 16:13-20 (ROMANS 11:33)

AUGUST 23, 2020

“THIS GATE IS CLOSED”

Imagine this scene. Jesus walks with his disciples in the yawning hours of the day. No 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 boundaries of Israel, 40 miles north of the Sea of Galilee near 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 fatigue and the advancing hour. Jesus breaks the silence: *"What are people saying about me?"* The disciples look at one another, waiting for someone to answer. One of them speaks up, buying time as much as seeking clarification asking; *"What do you mean?"* *"Who do the people say that I am"* Jesus says. *"We've been hearing John the Baptist, Elijah, a few say Jeremiah or some other prophet."*

After another silence Jesus asks, *"Who do you say that I am?"* But this time there is no pause – Peter bursts out *"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 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. Now 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 that it is too late in 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 more than offset by the rising contempt many were holding him in. Jesus is going much deeper this evening – deep into his people's history, even deeper than 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 – which it's bound to do. Just outside Caesarea Philippi, maybe even where this conversation took place was a cave and a spring of water. 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 that the entrance of the cave became known as *"the gate of hades...hell"* for our purposes.

There Jesus told Peter the confession he'd just made would be the foundation upon which Jesus would erect his church and that gate of hades would shut. Things are accelerating in the gospel of Matthew now. Miracles and healings are giving way to death and resurrection predictions. Shortly after this conversation Jesus would be transfigured on a mountain near Caesarea Philippi. Then it was off to Jerusalem to show what God meant when he said on that transfiguration mountain "*this is my Son...listen to him*" and what it means for a person to do what Peter did - call Jesus "the Christ", their Savior and Lord. By the "*gates of hades*" with their frightening depth, Jesus talked of something deeper - a love that forgives and a confession that saves a person from their sin.

You are 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'd hoped, (or hope) never see the light of day. You've survived the learning lessons from the playground and the lunch line - you did your share of excluding or saying something hurtful. If you're a teenager right now - then you are learning about loyalty and fragility in relationships, finding out what your values are, how the ones you were taught here don't go over so well with your friends - you are being schooled in lessons about reputation and peer pressure. You are a young man or woman right now - 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 a social calendar - you have to balance a budget.

You are the adult who is starting to wonder if making and just as quickly spending money is all your life will amount to, time and money squandered can't be so easily gotten back - your values might not be so much more in tune with your faith then when you were a teen either. You're old and starting to notice that your Christmas card list has fewer names on it every year and it crosses your mind that sooner or later, yours will be the one crossed off.

You are all part of a community that has changed in the last six months in a big way. If you're young, you've had to learn about disappointment - a ruined summer. If you're old and "vulnerable" as they say, you've learned that home may be safe but sure isn't where you want to be all the time. Though we humans have enormous reservoirs with which to store regret, stress, frustration, or hurt, eventually they surface in trickles or torrents. It can be a humbling or ugly thing when that happens ... no one likes to "*spill over*".

So picture in your mind's eye an evening at a place called Caesarea Philippi. Jesus walks past an ancient cavern whose dark waters spilled over from the deep - "the gate of hades" they called it - folks afraid of it while some built temples in a vainglorious attempt to pacify it. There Jesus punctuates the stillness asking to no one in particular a question everyone must answer "*Who do you say that I am?*" - and a single confessor - a erratic one for sure - with Peter we're in good company, but a confessor of Christ gains our Lord's attention - and wins His praise.

On the strength of that confession Jesus said the "*gates of hades*" are finished - we've nothing from it to fear, its accusations swallowed by forgiveness. "*Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God*" indeed! AMEN