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Proper 16A

The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks this crucial question, starting by asking what the disciples are hearing as they have traveled. He has just had another encounter with the Pharisees. In an earlier encounter, they challenged his authority to heal, and he has just had another such encounter. Perhaps Jesus is feeling as if it is time to check in with the disciples. Were they rattled by these exchanges? What were they thinking? They have probably been walking in little groups along the roads as they have traveled, and have been discussing this very question quietly amongst themselves. “I know what others have been saying, but who do you think he is?”

The timing of the question may have startled them, but it was probably not a complete surprise. First Jesus asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The answers they give are the ones they have heard, and they are Biblical: “Well, perhaps John the Baptist, or Elijah.” Matthew throws in Jeremiah as a possibility, the unhappy and suffering prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus pursues the question. “But who do you say that I am?” Because that is the important one, isn’t it? It’s hard for us to grasp the power of that question in that particular place and time. So, imagine, for a moment, that you are in the midst of a very important religious festival for a religion other than Christianity. And you are in a foreign city where almost all of the people embrace that religion. You are outside, waiting for an important ritual or liturgy to begin, and you are surrounded by these believers. And suddenly you declare, “I am a follower of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. I believe he is the son of the one God, and I believe in the Holy Spirit that guides and inspires and sustains me in my life as a Christian.” What sort of reaction might you receive? The context is important. Jesus did not ask the disciples in a deserted place along the road. He asked them in the city of Caesarea Philippi.

So now, imagine Jesus asking his disciples that all important question, “But who do you say that I am?” in a city originally centered on worship of Baal, then Pan, and more recently, the emperor of Rome? Herod the Great named it Caesarea Philippi after Caesar, which was a smart political move. When he died and his lands were redistributed among his sons, the part with this city went to his son Philip. Philip renamed it, tacking his own name on, and it became known as Caesarea Philippi. It’s important to know this because it points out that Jesus chose this place quite intentionally to ask questions about who he was. He did this on thoroughly Roman ground. It is a massive challenge to Roman authority to have one of your disciples call you “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” in a town where the Roman occupiers taught that Caesar was God.

So, Peter gives his answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Perhaps he was the spokesman, giving voice to what they all had been discussing. But it feels more like he just blurted it out, that it was a raw, unrehearsed statement of faith. And Jesus blesses him, because this realization is straight from God. To mark the occasion, to signal that this is a turning point, Jesus makes a pronouncement familiar to us all: “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.”

This solid rock language is ancient in the tradition. From Isaiah: “Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the

quarry from which you were dug.<sup>1</sup>” And of course, the more familiar reference from the psalms: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”<sup>2</sup>

Peter is being reminded that he is looking at and acknowledging the rock from which he was hewn. It’s a glorious moment, but something inside us flutters when we hear it because we know Peter. We know that in the future, when it really matters, Peter will deny three times that he knew Jesus or was with him. The gates of Hades attempting to prevail. Peter will show himself to be frightened, shaky, and unable to make the same declaration under pressure: “He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And for that we feel deeply with him as he lays bare his full and imperfect humanity, just not able to acknowledge his savior.

Peter is under construction, as are all of us. He is growing in faith and Jesus sees this and blesses him for it, even though his growth might be miniscule and slow. He might be nicknaming him “rock,” but Jesus knows that he himself is the solid rock. Peter is but a mere chip off the old block, as are all of us.

We are no less impulsive than Peter, and like Peter, we deny that we know Jesus, probably not in words, but sometimes in actions, and sometimes as many as three times in a row. But it is on just such shaky rocks that the church is built. Over and over God chooses the unlikely, the undeserving, and the treacherous. If Peter can blurt out the truth, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” then so can we also.

Years ago, the southern writer Flannery O’Connor wrote to a student: “Even in the life of a Christian, faith rises and falls like the tides of an invisible sea. Faith is still there, even when you can’t see it, or feel it, if you want it to be there. You realize, I think, that faith is more valuable, more mysterious, altogether more immense than anything you can learn or decide upon in college. Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free – not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s Peter, isn’t it, being formed by something larger than his own intellect, or the intellects of his fellow disciples. He is being formed by the living God, incarnate among them. And it is that same God who is the builder, selecting the imperfect and flawed foundational stones that we are.

Who do we say that Jesus is? We say that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We will try to say it every day, although we are weak and spineless sometimes, like Peter. But we are also chips off the old block, too, and we are solid enough on which to build, not by our own merit, but because of God. But it doesn’t matter, really, because we are made of stronger stuff than we know, the stuff of which God made us.

So in the Christian life, we have to ask, “Who am I now, and who am I called to become, with God’s help?” because all of us, like Peter, are under construction, with renovations needed. Some of us are like the stones by the sea, worn smooth from life’s storms. Some of us are rough and craggy. Some of us are tilting at an odd angle, like the rocks that glaciers push up out of the ground. Some of us are straight and true. Each of us has talents and unique gifts, and we

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 51:1

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:22

<sup>3</sup> Flannery O’Connor, in a letter to student Alfred Corn, May 30, 1962. *Selections from The Letters of Flannery O’Connor: The Habit of Being*. First Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 1979, p. 476-479

hold them in trust for the building of the kingdom. God, you are the builder, fit us mismatched stones together as only you can do, for the sake of your purposes and your love for humankind, that we might know you in your son, and make you known to others.