

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
August 30, 2020
XIII Pentecost, Matthew 16:(13-20)21-28

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

During this long August, we have followed Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew: from his rejection at his Nazareth home, to a deserted place where he, unsuccessfully, sought solace from the press of his disciples; from Gennesaret where he healed the sick, to the mountainside where he fed the thousands; and, last Sunday into this, to the district of Caesarea Philippi, about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee.

This site would have been known to the disciples as a place of cultic worship, anciently hosting devotions to the Baal of Tyre. Despite the Israelites' call to worship Yahweh alone, for generations they continued to pay homage to this and many other lesser, local gods, until the son of Jehoshaphat "wiped out Baal from Israel."ⁱ According to the scriptures, that tenth king of Israel, Jehu, brought a commission of eighty soldiers to the Tyre temple of this Baal, and "they demolished the pillar of Baal, and destroyed the temple of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day."ⁱⁱ Young people with us for our back-to-school blessings at 11:00 this morning, stay with me on this score, for see, this Jehu turned a temple into a toilet ... an emphatic condemnation.

During later years of Greek influence, this same town became known as *Paneas*, so named because of the worship of the Greek God, Pan. Pan, imagined as half-man and half-goat, wooed the creatures of the wilderness with a small instrument fashioned of hollow reeds, which we now know more familiarly as the "pan flute." Devotees of Pan (these forebearers of the great Zamfir) would worship the lusty god at the natural spring flowing at this site.

Nearer Jesus' day, Herod the Great renamed this town "Caesarea," after "he built there a temple to honor Caesar Augustus, the founding Emperor of the Roman Empire."ⁱⁱⁱ When Herod's son, Phillip, succeeded his father, he expanded the city and renamed it after Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor at the time of Jesus' adulthood, and (boasting no small measure of vanity) after himself: hence, "*Caesarea Philippi.*"

The early readers of Matthew's Gospel would also have known of Caesarea Philippi's more recent – and infamous – history as a vacation destination for the Roman general Vespasian and the gross brutality of his son, Titus. It was Vespasian "who began the siege of Jerusalem [around the year 66] and then left his son in charge to complete it when he became Emperor. After the fall of Jerusalem [and the destruction of the Jewish Temple], Titus and his troops returned to Caesarea Philippi, where [the historian] Josephus reports [Titus] had some of the Jewish captives thrown to wild animals," a vicious flex of his family's imperial muscle.^{iv}

So, “when *Jesus* [comes into this] district of Caesarea Philippi” – this complicated religious, political, and personal crossroads – “he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”^v And, like an eager classroom of students who have finished their summer reading, the disciples answer:

. “Wait, I know this one: John the Baptist! – who, though beheaded, has somehow come back to life in you! *They say you’re John the Baptist!*”

. “Oh, and they also say you’re Elijah! – the prophet who brought people back from the dead, the one who, himself, did not die, but ascended in a whirlwind. *They say you’re Elijah, somehow returned from heaven!*”

And then Jesus, narrowing his gaze, looks his friends in their eyes, and asks, “What about you? ... Who do you say that I am?”

. You who now stand at the crossroads of Baal and Pan ...
What about you ... who do you say that I am?

. You who now stand at the crossroads of Caesars and Kings ...
What about you ... who do you say that I am?

. You who now stand at the crossroads of power and vanity,
of Roman authority and Jewish suffering,
of John the Baptist and Elijah ...
What about you ... who do you say that I am?^{vi}

Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” prompting Jesus’ affirmation: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! ... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”^{vii}

After sternly ordering “the disciples not to tell anyone that he [is] the Messiah,”^{viii} this morning’s appointment begins with Jesus explaining to the disciples that “he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”^{ix}

Despite Jesus’ blessing and commission still echoing, Peter struggles to accept this inevitability, and he dares “rebuke” Jesus.^x Taking his teacher aside, Peter protests, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”^{xi}

Jesus responds swiftly to this one he has only just renamed, assigning him a new and sensational appellation: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”^{xii} Turning to all the disciples, Jesus continues, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”^{xiii}

See, Jesus' revelation of his death's inevitability serves as a reminder that even the faithful cannot exempt themselves from this world's suffering. Indeed, following Jesus requires that we take up our own cross as Jesus took up his – not to endure *Jesus'* sufferings, but to face our own ... to face the consequences of our faith in both the shadow and the light of Jesus' Cross:

. the shadow of the Cross – recognizing the world we have inherited as a Caesarea Philippi of convenience and conceit, of vanity, violence, privilege, and power;

. and the light of the Cross – seeing Jesus' Resurrection as a promise of hope and a call to heroism, as the very renewal of mercy and love, against which no injustice will stand in the end.

Jesus knows who he is, even if Peter's appeal for ease proves a stumbling block. His question – “Who do you say that I am?” – is not for his sake, but for Peter's! For Jesus knows that if Peter will profess Jesus as “Messiah, the son of the Living God,” then Peter might finally realize who he is. And who is Peter? Well, Peter is a child of the Living God; a brother of the Gracious Savior; a member of the Body of Christ, loved from before time and beloved forever ... and people of God, this is the Good News of these hard days: *that is who you are, too.*

. You who stand at the crossroads of summer's end and the first day of school: *do you know who you are?* You are a child of the Living God.

. You who stand at the crossroads of one job ending and an uncertain season beginning: *do you know who you are?* You are loved, from before time and for ever.

. You who stand at the crossroads of the pandemic and the police, the hurricanes and the hate: *do you know who you are?* You are sisters and brothers of the Gracious Savior and members of the very Body of Christ.

Jesus prophesies his Passion and calls us to take up our cross not so we would define ourselves by the shadow of the world – see, that was Peter's mistake – *but that we would see ourselves in the light of God's Love.*

Oh, friends: in this most difficult and demanding of years *be who you are and have always been:* a child of God, holy and good, loved, loveable, and made for loving. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

ⁱ II Kings 10:28.

ⁱⁱ II Kings 10:27.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Keck, et al, p. 342.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 343.

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- v Matthew 16:13.
 - vi Matthew 16:15.
 - vii Mathew 16:17-18.
 - viii Matthew 16:20.
 - ix Matthew 16:21.
 - x Mathew 16:22a.
 - xi Matthew 16:22b.
 - xii Matthew 16:23.
 - xiii Matthew 16:24.