

---

## *A Rock is Every Follower of Christ*

**A sermon by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir**  
**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 16, Year A**

Origen of Alexandria, an early Christian scholar and theologian, writes, "if we too have said like Peter, "Thou art the Christ, ... we become Peter... a rock is every disciple of Christ ... and upon every such rock is built every word of the church... all bear the surname of 'rock' who are the imitators of Christ..."

We all, one way or another, take the name of Peter, the Rock of Jesus which he promised to build His Church on. We all are Rocks of the Rock, Christians of Christ!

In the gospel today, Jesus asked two important questions to his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is" and "who do you say that I am?" Disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." But see Jesus here was more interested in knowing what his disciples thought who he was. After having spent 3 years alongside them, Jesus wanted to know what they thought of him. Not what people thought, not even the large crowd who had been fed by Jesus multiple times. But Jesus wanted to know what his disciples would answer to this very personal, intimate, and vulnerable question: "But who do you say that I am?" And of course, our bold friend Peter who is always ready to answer every question of Jesus or step up in every situation, opened himself up by proclaiming "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." You are the Messiah, that we have been waiting for. Jesus, you are the anointed one! The promised deliverer, ordained and commissioned by God to save God's people. You are the Christ, that we have been waiting for, who can liberate us!

Friends, the church, the body of believers, which is built on this awakening, on this proclamation will stand forever. All the faithful make up the Church of Christ on the confession that "He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The Church built on this proclamation will never die, it didn't in the past and it won't in the future. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

It is important to note that Jesus' journey to the cross started after this openness from Peter and his disciples. After this confession by the disciples Jesus started to make it clear to them that he was destined to go to Jerusalem, suffer a great deal, be killed and on the third day be raised. Even though Jesus knew that Peter was going to deny him, as Peter surrendered and opened himself up to Jesus, Jesus said, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed." You are blessed! Jesus also gave him a new name – Peter, Petros in Greek which means a large stone, a rock. 'Peter, because you have recognized the presence of the living God in you, you will testify my name till the end of the ages.'

With that self-awakening, by recognizing the presence of the Son of the living God, Peter did become the rock of the church that withstood two millennia. The same Peter who once was a fisherman, spent the rest of his life proclaiming the gospel to not only hundreds but thousands: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. The Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

However, Peter's journey to becoming the rock of the Church was not so smooth. Peter whom Jesus called the Rock, that same Peter only a little afterwards denied Jesus three times because of the fear. As you might remember, when Jesus was under trial, and Peter was anxiously waiting in the high priest's courtyard to learn the sentence passed against Christ, he was accused of being one of Jesus' followers. The fear of death overcame Peter, and he loudly denied his former confession, he denied the Son of God before the sons of men. From you are Messiah, the Son of the living God to I do not know this man at all. We probably cannot even imagine the pain he must have felt betraying his master, denying the Son of the living God. Both sides of

Peter – his betrayal and denial of Jesus as well as his great services to the Church have always had a special meaning to me and my life.

Ironically, I have my own story of fear and denying Jesus, but not because I was uncomfortable or unsure about my faith but because I feared for my life if I openly declared my faith in Christ. I was a college student at the time of this story. Due to certain worldwide incidents, there were massive strikes and protests happening in Pakistan which increased hostility towards Christians there. I was trying to get to my home after classes but couldn't get any kind of transportation when one man offered me a ride. As we drove, we were talking about all the things happening in the country at the time. As engaging as I was during our conversation, the driver became suspicious of me, because he senses some otherwise during our talk and all of a sudden, he asked me: "Are you a Christian?" I felt chills all over my body as I replied to him: "No, I'm not! What are you even talking about." And I, immediately went back to our conversation to cover up my fear.

Before I had managed, to gather my thoughts, he again asked me: "Are you really telling the truth? Are you not a Christian?" Fighting back my tears, I answered him again firmly: "No, I'm not." As we continued our conversations the only thought in my mind was how to get out of the car as soon as possible. Towards the end of our ride, he again circled back saying: "I have a doubt that you are a Christian." I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears as for the third time I answered him: "I'm not." I am not a Christian. That saying 'No' multiple times was not like I was rebellious or tired of the church, but it was a genuine fear that if I said I was a Christian, my life might have been in danger.

And even today, when I try to make sense of this encounter, I keep coming back to the journey of Peter. What could he have been thinking, going from the bold confession of "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" to denying Jesus, saying "I do not know this man at all". The very fear took over the Rock on which Jesus promised to build His Church. Peter who days before proclaimed "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God", the same Peter whose heart was on fire for Jesus, denied Christ over and over again when he was overcome by fear.

But friends, this is not the end of the story, this is not the end of Peter or me or you, even if we think that we have done unspeakable things and have gone to the point of no return. Because the same Peter who denied Jesus was forgiven and covered with God's love and mercy. Jesus healed the wounds of Peter's betrayal through his threefold affirmation of love for the Lord. 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?' and Simon said: "Lord, you know everything!" You know everything!" The same Peter who denied Jesus was healed, reinstated, and given the charge over, to feed His lambs, and tend His sheep...

There is nothing that can't be healed with the love of Christ! Like the words of the famous African American spiritual goes:

"There is a balm in Gilead.  
To make the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead,  
To heal the sin-sick soul..."

There is nothing – no one that can't be healed with the love of Jesus! Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, even our own actions.

Like Origen of Alexandria said, by being members of the body of Christ, by simply opening up ourselves, we all carry the surname of Rock. The message is same for us if we have the same openness and awakening of Peter to the Son of the living God. With the same humility as his, we also carry the name of Rock and on that Rock Jesus can and will build its Church.

So, my beloved siblings in Christ, wherever you are on your journey, whether you are boldly proclaiming Jesus as the Son of the living God, OR fearfully denying His name, remember that the goodness of God will always overshadow your past weaknesses. There is enough mercy at God's house. There is enough at God's house.

A rock is every disciple of Christ, covered in God's mercy and love. With each one of us carrying the name of Rock, let us build Churches that tells the story of loving, liberating and lifegiving God, the God of freedom, love, and peace.

What is Jesus for you? The Messiah, the Son of the living God. Amen!

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*