

“The Pebble that became a Rock”
Matthew 16: 13-20
Mike Magee
Brentwood First Presbyterian
8/24/08

Scene 1 Who do you say that the Son of Man is?

Jeremiah might have been a bullfrog! But he was also a prophet! We remember that prophets are not fortune tellers like Jean Dixon. Prophets are those men and women who speak the painful truth we do not want to but need to hear. Jeremiah lived about a hundred years after the prophet Isaiah. Jeremiah's father served as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. As a prophet, he was definitely within the circle of power. There are some social justice organizations that, like Jeremiah, are prophetic. For example, the American Cancer Society. Like Jeremiah, the ACS preaches social justice from inside the circle of power, getting endorsements from Johns Hopkins and in many communities, the United Way. The American Cancer Society was founded in 1913 by physicians and business men in NYC. Its web site says it is a *"nationwide community-based voluntary health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives, and diminishing suffering from cancer, through research, education, advocacy and service."* Like all organizations, it has had its share of criticism. It has been criticized for seeming to promote the mammography industry, and failing to point out the role of pesticides in causing cancer. As the former president of the Nashville chapter of the ACS, I am biased, but I think these criticisms are unfounded. For example, their main focus now is on the socioeconomically disadvantaged. The ACS says, *"if a women gets diagnosed with breast cancer, but doesn't have health insurance, she is 40% more likely to die."* As an organization, it is like the prophet Jeremiah. And in its battle to label cigarette packages, and promote mammography, the use of sunscreen, and a healthy diet, some would say that it has transformed American consciousness. But like Jeremiah, it has done so from inside the circle of power.

John the Baptizer was another prophet. But unlike Jeremiah, he spoke from outside the circle of power. Some social justice organizations, like John the Baptizer, are also outside the circle of power. The National Organization for Women is the largest American feminist organization. It was founded in 1966 and has a membership of 500,000 members and 550 chapters in all 50 U.S. states. A Statement of Purpose on its web site describes the purpose of NOW as *"to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."* You might debate some of NOW's issues, and I am sure there are those in power who wish to banish it or put it to death like Herod did with the prophet John the Baptizer. In this sense, as an organization, it is like John the Baptizer. It preaches social justice from outside the circle of power. Even so, some would say that it, like the American Cancer Society, has transformed American consciousness. But like John the Baptizer, and unlike Jeremiah and the American Cancer society, it does this from outside the circle of power.

Elijah was a do-gooder miracle worker. And there are organizations who like Elijah work miracles. Doctors Without Borders is an international medical humanitarian organization created by doctors and journalists in France in 1971. Today, they provide aid in nearly 60 countries to people whose survival is threatened by armed conflict, epidemics, malnutrition, exclusion from health care, and natural disasters. Their work is based on the humanitarian principles of medical ethics and impartiality. Their website says they are *“committed to bringing quality medical care to people caught in crisis regardless of race, religion, or political affiliation. On any one day, more than 27,000 workers from Doctors without Borders, representing dozens of nationalities, can be found providing assistance to people caught in crises around the world. They are doctors, nurses, logistics experts, and others, who work together in accordance with Doctors without Border’s guiding principles of humanitarian action and medical ethics.”* As an organization, they are truly a miracle worker, like that Old Testament prophet, Elijah. So I applied to travel to the Far East with Doctors without Borders when the tsunami hit in 2005. But they said they did not need me. Maybe it was because I could only stay 10 days. Or maybe Doctors without Borders does not want to risk the consequences of anyone evangelizing Muslims, not that I would. But I believe their rule of impartiality was threatened by my religious background. I think if I had said I was an atheist they might have taken me. Some would say their very name has transformed world consciousness, uncovering the fallacy of man-made borders. And I believe they do work miracles. But Doctors without Borders takes pride in its impartiality, that it is neither a religious nor a spiritual organization.

The ACS, NOW, and Doctors without Borders are great organizations. They have transformed the world. But because they are neither religious nor spiritual, they do not have the power to transform individuals. So no one would confuse them with the church which Jesus calls into being. Neither did Peter confuse Jesus with Jeremiah, John the Baptizer, or Elijah. And neither do we.

Scene 2 But who do you say that I am?

It often said Jesus' favorite teaching method is asking questions. He asks over 100 questions in the four Gospels. Of his parents Jesus asks, "Didn't you know that I would be in my Father's house?" Of the paralyzed man he asks, "Do you want to get well?" Of people who listened to him teach but failed to act, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" No question is more important, however, than the question he posed to his disciples at Caesarea Phillipi: "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter answers. He says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The word Messiah means, the chosen one. The one to listen to. The one to emulate. The one of whom we ask, “What would Jesus say?” and, “What would Jesus do?”

Peter does not say Jesus is just a preacher of justice, either inside or outside a circle of power. He does not say Jesus is just a do good-er or miracle worker. No, he says he is the one God has chosen to show us the way, the truth, and the life. He is the one put on a

totem pole, a cross, for all to see clearly. A blinding flash of light 2000 years ago that still lights our path today, a super nova brighter than the noon day sun.

A blinding super nova with the capacity to change the entire world, one person at a time. But we know Peter is of little faith, because Jesus tells us so. It is hard for us to understand why Jesus would build his church on Peter's proclamation.

Scene 3 You are Petros and on this petra I will build my church

There are only two places in any of the Gospels where the word for church is used, and this is one of them. "You are Petros / Rocky, and on this petra / rock I will build my church."

Do you remember in the scripture we studied two weeks ago, that Jesus said to Peter, and all the other disciples, "O you of little faith?" And do you remember the scripture we studied last week, when Jesus pushed that painful button again, when he spoke to that gentile woman who observed neither the Sabbath nor the Leviticus dietary laws, and certainly was not circumcised? He told this gentile woman, "Woman, great is your faith!" Those holier-than-thou disciples were certainly astir when they heard that while they have little faith, this riff raff gentile WOMAN has great faith. The Greek name Petros, corresponding with the Aramaic word Cephas, is a nickname equivalent to "Rocky." I am thinking of Rocky Balboa. "Hey, Adrienne!" But this slow witted little piece of rock, this pebble, this Petros, this Cephas, this Peter of little faith, is the foundation rock upon which Jesus builds his church. So what is it about Peter, about Rocky, that stops Jesus in his tracks?

The state highway department in Pennsylvania decided to build a bridge, and began working from both sides of the river. When the workers reached the middle of the river, they found they were thirteen feet off. The Saturday Evening Post explained that each crew of workmen had used a different reference point. No wonder they did not connect.

In that same article the Saturday Evening Post tells about a small disc on the Meades Ranch in north central Kansas where the thirty-ninth parallel from the Atlantic to the Pacific crosses the ninety-eighth meridian running from Canada to the Rio Grande. The exact center of the United States. The National Oceanic Survey, a small federal agency whose business it is to locate the exact positions of every point in the United States, uses that mathematically recognized reference point on the Meades Ranch. Since using that small disc on the Meades ranch as a reference point, no mistakes have been made in determining position, and none are expected. All ocean liners and commercial planes use this reference point. Our government can build no dams and fly no planes without this agency telling it the exact location to the fraction of an inch. "Location by approximation," the article goes on to say, "can be costly and dangerous."

Maybe that is why there is so much chaos in our society today. Everyone is using their own reference point. Maybe we need a universal reference point so that we can say, "Here. Here is how the good life is lived."

For Christians there is such a reference point - Jesus. What would Jesus say? What would Jesus do? That is the question that continually helps us in our quest for living a fulfilling life. Jesus not only reveals the character of God, but he also patterns the ideal life for humanity.

Carl Jung once said, "Among all my patients in their last 40 years of life, for everyone one of them their problem was that of finding a religious outlook on life. Every one of them fell ill because he or she had lost that which religions of every age have given their followers. And all who did regain this religious outlook have been healed." (Modern Man in Search of a Soul, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1993).

Peter, Rocky, peering from his place of little faith, from his place of little trust, peering from his small dark place, looks outside his dark place and sees the supernova who is Jesus. He does not just trust, he knows Jesus is the one to watch, and the one to listen to. He knows Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We know that Peter has little faith, little trust, because Jesus says so. But this man of little faith knows who to listen to and who to watch. So do we.

Conclusion

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

You do not have to have the faith of Abraham and Moses. You do not even have to have the faith of that spiritual, but irreligious, woman of whom Jesus said, "Great is your faith!" All you have to do is keep your eyes and ears on Jesus. Because it is on our tiny pebbles of faith, that Jesus will build his church.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say