

A New Revelation, A New Identity
Matthew 16:13-20
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In today's reading of Matthew, we find Jesus has traveled to the very northern part of Judea to the city of Caesarea Philippi. You may deduce from the name that it is a Hellenized city, a Judean city transformed into a Roman cultural center and stronghold. In fact, it is a city that Herod the Great's son Phillip II built in honor of Ceasar Agustus. Episcopal minister, Rev. Marcea Paul describes Caesaria Philippi this way: "Caesarea Philippi was a Roman town in Northern Israel right on the Syrian border. There were many religions in the area. The pagan people worshipped in fourteen different temples. Herod the Great built a large temple for the Romans to worship Caesar. In addition, just outside Caesarea Philippi, there is a large rock cliff, hundreds of feet high. Beneath this rock cliff is a cavern filled with water. Greeks considered the cavern the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks, and shepherds. For the Greeks, this was a sacred place."

This city is the only mention in this story found in Matthew 16 and Mark 8 the New Testament writings, and I don't think it is by chance. This is a turning point in Matthew's writing of the Gospel. Jesus has been doing miracles throughout Galilee and Samaria performing his greatest miracles. Crowds are growing and the opposition by the religious authorities is also growing. Many people have asked Jesus who he is. John the Baptist has sent messengers to ask Jesus who he is. Jesus' response was to tell John what miracles they have seen. When the religious leaders accuse Jesus of being a demon controlled by Beelazabub. Jesus refutes it saying, "how can a house divided stand". Jesus leaves them with the question "by who's authority am I doing this, if not by God's authority". Jesus' own disciples fall back in wonder asking, "who is this person?" when he calms the sea.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel is bringing us along the mounting evidence of Jesus' powerful miracles and moving teachings as we also wrestle with the question, "who is Jesus?" Now we find ourselves with the disciples in the Empire's Stronghold in the center of greed, idolatry, the worship of Caesar and religious nationalism. It is here that Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples are quick to answer. But look at their answers – you are John the Baptist who preached repentance. You are Elijah who faced Jezabel and defeated the false prophets of Baal. Others say you are Jeremiah – the weeping prophet who went into exile and suffered with the people in Babylon. Yes, we could say that Jesus is modelling his ministry after these great people of God. Prophets rejected in their time, but revered now by the people. Jesus is calling for repentance. He is standing up to corruption and evil governmental powers. He is denouncing the false religious teachers who have been corrupted by power and extortion, leading the people away from true worship. Jesus is doing amazing miracles demonstrating God's power. Jesus is among the suffering masses carrying the burden of oppression seeking liberation. But is that enough? Is it enough that we have another prophet of God come along to denounce evil and call for reform? Will anything really change? Or will the powers remain in place. One can become rather cynical and lose hope that anything will change if all you believe is that Jesus is just another prophet like the old familiar voices.

We hear that still today. Many people look at Jesus and say, "oh he was a great prophet. He was a suffering servant. He was a great moral teacher. But that's it. We can take it or leave it. We don't need to follow his teachings if we don't want to, because things won't really change. In the end Jesus was just a human like all of us.

Even the disciples are tempted to believe what others are saying about Jesus. It is easy to fake one's faith by living off of what others have told you to believe. It is easy to

follow along like everyone else, but when faced with opposition and risk you will find it hard to stand if it is not rooted deep within you. Jesus has been living with these disciples for nearly three years. They have watched his every move and heard all his teachings. Witnessed his many miracles. They even watched him walk on water and worshiped him when he calmed the seas. Peter was the only one who ventured out of the comfortable boat of false security to be with Jesus in the storm. And now Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?”

In the boat they worshiped Jesus, proclaiming, “truly this is the son of God.” But once again they are filled with doubt and fall silent. Under the shadows of the roman temples, the worship of Caesar and the empire, the pressure of their own tradition challenging Jesus’ authority and the other competing powers in this great city, they struggle. “But who do YOU say that I am?” This is the question Jesus poses as he turns toward Jerusalem to face the cross. Jesus is looking for signs that their faith will sustain them through those darkest hours. It will take more than an intellectual assent to endure the trials of faith they will soon face.

Can we relate? Do we, the reader, feel the pressures of society and competing beliefs in our world challenging our faith and allegiance to Jesus still today?

Jesus asks the disciples “Who do you say that I am?” All fall silent until finally Simon Peter speaks up, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That is not just an intellectual assent. That is not mindless repetition of a dogmatic statement or creed.

That is the voice of revelation. That is the voice of core conviction of the heart speaking. That is the voice of true faith, that cannot be shaken.

Jesus’ response is, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but the Lord in heaven. 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 transformative power of God's revelation is what Jesus has been watching for. This is the rock upon which Jesus says that the community of faith will be built. I believe this because we see Simon's name is changed here by Jesus, it points to the importance of revelation as the foundation of true faith in God.

We can point to many instances where name changes happen because of an encounter with God and a new revelation and covenant is formed with God. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah and are renamed as the founders of a great multitude. Jacob is renamed Israel after he wrestles with God and prevails. He goes from the swindler to the one who strives with God. Here Simon, which means "one who listens", becomes Peter the rock representing the foundational revelation of Jesus' divinity as the core of a transformed life of faith.

God seeks to invade our lives, our understanding of the world, in such a way that we are fundamentally changed deep within. God seeks to give us a new revelation, a new world view that impacts everything we see. When Jesus says "Simon, son of Jonah" the reader is connecting Peter, the fisher of men, to the son or descendent of Jonah. Jonah was sent to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh in Syria, very similar to the city Caesarea Philippi they are in. Simon's name means "to be heard". Just as Jonah (the dove messenger to the oppressor) eventually listened to God and preached repentance in Nineveh. The people heard and repented. The message of repentance is also Peter's revelation and it will be the cornerstone of faith within the church.

For us today, have we received the revelation of God to be a people of reconciliation, of repentance, and of grace? Are we, like Peter, able to listen deeply to the call of God on our lives so we build upon this firm foundation in Christ? Are we able to renounce our allegiance to the false gods of this world and proclaim divine power of Jesus as Messiah?

What is the revelation of God you need? And What new name will shape your future in Christ?