

Proper 17: Year 29/30 August 2020 Morning and Evening Prayer

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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The rock, the boulder: the promise of the God's loving plans awaits

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Matthew 16:21-28

Who am I? Who is Jesus? Who is G-d? Three simple questions of identity, to which here are some seemingly simple answers: I am me. Jesus is the son of G-d, G-d is love. Those were my childhood responses. They still ring true.

Who am I? Who is Jesus? Who is G-d? While my children were school aged, I would often say I am Guy and Catrin's Mother, Jesus is my Redeemer, God is the one to whom I pray continually, because to quote Garrison Keiller "the *life of a parent is one of constant wordless prayer.*"¹

Questions of identity haunt us, cling to us, shape who we are and how we interact with the world, and yet as we journey through life, our understanding of self and others is continually being refreshed, transformed by the changes around us.

In last week's Gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples "Who do you say I am?" Simon replies "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Bingo, or returning to scripture speak, Jesus says "Blessed are you." Jesus identifies Simon as Simon Peter, the Rock, the foundation upon which Jesus will build the church. Simon, son of Jonah, that is to say Simon ben Jonah, is now Simon Peter. In this Gospel narrative, Simon loses the family association, ben Jonah.

The attributing phrase, ben Jonah, son of Jonah, is replaced with the Aramaic word Cephas, or in the Greek Petra: Petra, Peter, the Rock. Simon ben Jonah, Simon Petra, Simon Peter. Here, then is the break from the links to the past, and a look into the future.

Peter, stubborn, craggy, with sure confidence, proclaims that Jesus is Messiah, Son of the Living God. And Jesus praises Peter, in front of all the other disciples for Peter's recognition. Jesus: Messiah. Peter: the solid Rock. That was last week's Gospel message.

In this week's reading, Jesus begins to reveal the future. Jesus will go to Jerusalem. This, to his disciples, makes perfect sense. After all Jerusalem is the Holy City, the place where the devout Jews traveled to make sacrifices and honor God: Jerusalem is the very cornerstone of Jewish identity. It also was the center of the Roman colonial ruling power over the people of Israel. Of course, Jesus will go to Jerusalem. After all, where else should Messiah be revealed to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Jesus tells his disciples that he will stand before the elders and chief priest and scribes. This also is something that the disciples would understand. After all, the elders are the community leaders, the chief priest are the spiritual representatives and the scribes are the legal guides. Together they represent the core of Jewish leadership. Elders, priest, and scribes: the Jewish elite, up against the Roman power: Messiah has indeed come.

¹ "Appreciation for a great appreciator" Chicago Tribune Feb 4, 2009 <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2009-02-04-0902030512-story.html>

But Jesus tells his disciples that Messiah has a different identity than what they envision. Jesus will go to Jerusalem. Once there, he will be killed; the Son of the Living God will die.

Peter, in his anxiousness pulls Jesus aside. Peter, not knowing how to respond, does what so many of us do when the world seems to be falling about in front of our very eyes. He wants to pack it all back into the box that he knows, of how he envisioned things. Yes, Peter's actions are certainly an expression of concern about Jesus' well fair. But, I think it is also about control, and the certainty of knowing that things will go according to plan. Peter has a picture of what it means to be Messiah. For Messiah to die is not a part of that plan. And yet, that is exactly part of the Greater Plan of God.

Jesus turns around to Peter. I image Jesus looks squarely at the face of Peter, eye-to-eye, and tells Peter that he is an obstruction. From cornerstone to stumbling block, a boulder in the way. Peter in his humanity, we in our humanity, can get so focused on what we "know" that we risk being the obstacle of God's greater plan. Yet, throughout scripture, we are continually called to trust in God's larger plan.

Peter is focused on the road to Jerusalem which leads to death, focused on the cross. But the message of God is beyond Jerusalem and the cross, to the Easter message. Jesus says "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Take up the cross, leave your old identity, place your previous understanding behind, and follow Jesus, take up God's greater plan. So, maybe this is not a command, but an invitation, words of encouragement to set aside our fears, to believe, to trust, even in, or maybe especially in this time of COVID-19 confusion and political unrest. I am certain that if someone told us last year that the people of St. James' would be pushed out of our little yellow building on Williams Street, we would have panicked and said "Not so, God forbid it." Or something like that. And yet, here we are, gathered together for worship and community, entirely outside of our little yellow building.

We are an Easter people, the cross is not the end, but the beginning. To take up the cross is to be able to set aside our fear, and see the world anew. We are at the brink of new beginnings in how we worship, in who we look to for clergy leadership, and in the ways we become more fully engaged with our local community.

The question is, will we, as St. James, Clinton, be a Rock that is part of the foundation for God's yet be to be revealed future, perhaps being transformed, in a new journey, or are we be so set and sure in our ways, so comfortable in our past that we revert back to the ways and doings of our past. Will we become the boulder, the obstruction for God's greater plan?

So here are some not so simple questions. Who are we as the people of St. James? How will we help bring Jesus Messiah into our community? What is the God of creation calling us to become?

The promise of the God's loving plans await us. We are... God's people. Jesus lives. God is the great I AM-who continually creates anew.

Let us bless the Lord. AMEN.