

“The Solid Rock”  
Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8;  
Matthew 16:13-20

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Whenever we read scripture, we are really reading in at least two different contexts. We are reading the context in which it was originally given—the story and its place and its participants, and how it was heard at that particular time. We are also reading it out of our own context. We are also reading it from our own experience. It feels to me that right now is a particular kind of context. A context in which we are hearing, we are seeing something a little different. A context that all of a sudden seems changed. Because we are living in a pandemic, we see things a little differently. At least it feels like it to me.

As we think about the pandemic, there is a sense of uncertainty and randomness. We hear about these situations where this one person goes to a particular place of gathering, whether it's a bar or a family gathering or a choir practice, and all of a sudden the virus spreads because some paths have intersected, and sometimes it seems a little random, uncertain. Nobody knows who that person is until later. That uncertainty wears on us. At least it wears on me. It is the beginning of this greater chaos we live in where such a small event, one person in one place, can create something that blossoms and blooms into something much larger. It's not just one person giving it to one person, but multiples can happen at once. We have what they call a super-spreading event.

It gives us a sense of chaos that feels hard to live with. It can ebb and flow in ways we don't really quite understand, nor can we fully predict. And not only that. If we just had the pandemic and just had to struggle with that, but it's only one of the events going on in our lives in the midst of all these other events that are going on. We have the natural disasters. The fires in California. The winds in Iowa. The threat of hurricanes on the east coast. The drought in the southwest. And then we have an economy that seems to have palpitations and we are uncertain of it. We have a political system that is struggling with its divisions and uncertainties. It creates for me, what I might simply call a complex mess that I don't understand how to live in and through. It is in the middle of that uncertainty and chaos and complexity that I struggle to know exactly what I should do, what I should trust, where I should stand.

The disciples perhaps also lived in a time that had a certain set of complexities and worries as well. We don't often think about it, but there were environmental events. There were droughts and worries about famine. The vast majority of people lived on the edge or in poverty while a very small group was wealthy and powerful. The inequity added to the chaos and complexity. Political and religious power and intrigue caused uncertainty in the lives of those influenced and affected. There certainly was a political/social system that oppressed them, and they felt unable to live their own lives because so much was defined by the Roman occupation.

In the midst of that, Jesus asked this question: Who do you say that I am? If we were asked that question, I wonder what we would say? How would we respond if Jesus asked, “Who do people say that I am?” It’s not even who do *you*, but who do *people* say that I am. Who do people say Jesus is in our day and time?

There are certainly those who come from a faith perspective who might say Jesus is Lord and Savior. And yet, in our time it feels like there are many more perspectives than that. There might be a few who would say Jesus is a good moral figure and had some good moral teachings. There might be some today who say, “Who is Jesus and why does it matter?” There might be others who say, “I don’t really know who Jesus is, but I’ve seen some of the people who say they follow him, and I don’t think I want to know him.”

It is in this context of ours where that question is a question we need to answer. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asks the disciples. Some say he’s the reincarnation of John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He’s a prophet. That is, he may speak for God and even have a way of making things work in God’s way, but they don’t get the fullness of who Jesus is. So Jesus asks Peter and the disciples, “Who do YOU say that I am?” That is a question that again comes into our lives. Who do WE say Jesus is?

When Peter answers, we have to decide how to understand who is answering here. Is it really just Peter? Is Matthew describing how Jesus is putting all the weight of the beginning of the church on Peter, or is Peter the quintessential disciple who has discovered that Jesus is the Messiah? The text doesn’t really tell us. I think I probably fall more on the side that Peter is the quintessential disciple. He is the one representing the disciples. He is showing us what a disciple can begin to see—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

There are two pieces here to what Peter is saying. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the one coming from God to show us who God is and show us God’s way. Literally, they were thinking that God would take over the world for them through the Messiah. Jesus gives us a few surprises in that respect, but he does show us God’s way. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the very love of God come to be with us and among us. So in that statement, Peter is suggesting Jesus is the one he trusts. In the midst of all the uncertainty, chaos, and complexity, Jesus is the one he trusts as the one who has come from God and will show them God’s way. He is the Messiah.

Then he adds that Jesus is the Son of God. In their time and situation, people were not so much defined by their individual characteristics, but by their family. That’s how they were identified, by family unit. In fact, Jesus does that when he says, and I said it when I read the scripture: Simon-bar-Jonah, which is actually translated as Simon, son of Jonah. That’s who Simon/Peter is. So as Peter says Jesus is the Son of God, that’s who he is. He is part of that particular family.

In a way that's the entry point in suggesting not only does Peter recognize who he is to trust, but where he belongs. He's beginning to enter into the family of God. He's beginning to recognize he is a child of God. And Jesus will invite us all to take down the barrier that we think is there between us and recognize that we are children of God and what it means to be part of God's family. It's about what we trust and where we belong. It feels like those are two elements I struggle with today in this world of uncertainty, of chaos, and of complexity. What/who do I trust and where do I belong?

I think this passage invites us to be, with Peter, a disciple who says Jesus is the Messiah, the one I trust, the one who brings God and shows us new life. And he's the one who shows us a new family. He shows us we are part of the family of God and that we have a place where we belong.

This may not solve all the uncertainty, and chaos, and confusion, but it gives us a solid place to stand in the midst of it. It enables me to have one to listen to and to show me the way. I may not see the full path through it all, but I do see the care for others that Jesus leads me to express. And, this leads me to realize how important the act of wearing a mask is as an expression of that care for others, for example.

In fact, if we continue to read on, Jesus also talks about that solid nature of the faith. It is on that rock he will create his church—those called out of the world to gather together. It is a way of hearing Jesus say that it is on that faith, on the trust and belonging, that you will find your way through and out of the chaos and the confusion, and find the very love and grace of God where we belong to the family of faith.

It is in that belonging, in that gathering together, that he goes on to talk about what will be loosed and be freed, and what will need to be held back and be bound. That's a way of talking about what the rabbis did, the teaching they offered. That's a way of beginning to see what I need to be careful of and what I need to allow to blossom in my life.

I think Paul says it slightly differently. We will "be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we will know what is good, acceptable, and perfect." The word is translated "perfect," but it's really *telios*. It's really the idea of the "end point." If you go on a journey and you make it to the end, that's been a perfect thing because the journey has been completed, the goal reached. Another translation of this phrase is "the perfect will of God" or the "goal of God." It's the goal of God for us.

As we begin to hold onto and trust in Jesus, the Messiah, the one who comes from God to show us the grace of God and give us the way of God, and to give us a place of belonging to be, as Paul says, the one body of Christ or the family of faith, it also enables us to begin to change the way we see the world.

I see this over and over again in my own life. I grew up in a certain way. I have a certain way I see things. I live in a particular society that sees things in a particular way, called socialization. My family of origin has shaped so clearly how I see the world. The

culture I live in has shown me all kinds of ways of thinking and believing. I struggle with some of those. I struggle with the idea that a king should be one who comes and sweeps away all that is wrong with the world and changes life for us. Indeed, it feels to me, as I begin to understand, as I trust in Jesus and belong to that family, that I have to be careful that I don't shape that trust and belonging into something that simply supports the way I want to see the world already. It feels to me that as I begin to recognize and trust in Jesus and hear the call to be part of the family of faith, there's a transformation and renewing in me. It's something that is always a little uncomfortable. It isn't exactly what I thought I wanted. It's encouraging me and engaging me in ways I didn't expect.

I think we have to be careful that we don't simply use our faith, our religion, to support the way we already want to think and rather truly allow our faith to transform us by the renewing of our minds so that we might see what is good and acceptable, and recognize the goal God has for us.

It is in the midst of these chaotic, uncertain, complex times that I need so much to trust in Jesus the Messiah, the one who comes from God to show us the grace of God, to show us that we are given new life. We have one we can pay attention to who will show us the way, and who invites us to know we belong to the family of God. And, to know that we can share what he brings and that God will transform us through the renewing of who we are so we might know what is good and acceptable, and the goal God has for us. Amen.