

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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Jesus asks who the people say he is, and Simon responds with “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That’s a fine answer, you and I can agree. However, the gravity of this statement is only felt if we have an understanding of where this exchange was said.

They were in Caesarea Philippi -- “Herod Philip’s Caesarville” is a good translation of the name. I’ve been there before. The place served as a political crossroads for regional kings. At the time of Jesus, this city had been recently renamed by its regional king, Herod Philip. What better way to show Caesar Augustus how much a bootlicker you are than by renaming an important city “Herod Philip’s Caesarville?” Yet, more than that, this city also contained a shrine for people to pray to and worship Caesar. He literally had a cult following there. So Caesarea Philippi was not just a political crossroads, it was saturated in the worst of sycophantic politics.

So when Simon said to Jesus in this place, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” it was a statement of faith as well as a political statement. Every Jewish person who longed for the Messiah’s arrival knew that the #1 expectation of the Messiah was to overthrow Caesar, at least in the region of Judah. Simon was saying that he believed Jesus is the one who will bring an end to the world’s present order of power. Jesus commends Simon for his insight, saying God must have given it to him. Then Jesus says, “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.” With that, I’m certain that the disciples gave sideways glances to each other.

You see, in Caesarea Philippi there is a cave in a rocky hillside, out of which flowed a continuous stream at that time, but it is now usually dry. You can’t go far into the cave, and you wouldn’t want to. There is a drop-off to a deep chasm of water that the Greeks and later the Romans thought to be bottomless, going straight down to Hades, that place where they believed all the dead sent. So the Greeks built a shrine to the pagan god Pan just outside the entrance to the cave. It still stands there today. The Greeks and Romans both would throw animals into this chasm as springtime sacrifices to appease Pan and to the other gods who resided in the underworld. So not only is Caesarea Philippi a place saturated in politics, it is saturated in the fear of death and Hades. All people in that part of the world -- including Jesus’ disciples -- knew that no other place produced as much terror as this cave to Hades where Pan supposedly dwelt.

“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Why would Jesus save such a statement for Caesarea Philippi? This whole exchange with Simon could have taken place by the Sea of Galilee or at his usual hangouts. He said it in Caesarea Philippi because he wanted to be clear that nothing -- not Herod Philip, not Caesar, not even death itself -- nothing can vanquish God’s church. The church was founded in this

death-filled and unscrupulously political location because the church is a proclamation. The church is the proclamation that Jesus alone is Messiah and Lord.

Simon's confession would become the common property of all believers, and for stating it Jesus bestowed upon Simon this name: Peter, the rock. So when you make this confession -- that Jesus is Lord, the Son of the living God -- you are like Peter, and your proclamation is the rock upon which the church stands. The most fitting place for this proclamation is in the face of death itself. The most fitting place for this proclamation is in the face of Caesar's lordship, or anyone else who demands our loyalty. So even when the reality of death overwhelms us, the church is there to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and death will not prevail.

Even when we hear this story on the Sunday sandwiched between two political conventions in an election year, the church must clearly proclaim that Jesus alone is Lord. As disciples, our identity is found in him. It can be easy to forget if we get caught up into the fervor of a politician or an ideology, but our loyalty as Christians is to Jesus alone. It can be easy to forget when every day bears reminders of death, but our hope as Christians is in Jesus alone.

What does that look like? What does it mean to have our identity in Jesus and our loyalty is in him? For starters, it means we act like him and -- as the apostle Paul says today -- our minds are renewed in him. The gospel lesson transitions to an example for us. Jesus continues to say to Simon, newly-renamed as Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Think of that. It is amazing that upon the founding of the church, God gives the church the power to do things here on earth that have eternal consequences. That is an awesome responsibility. So we should humbly seek some direction in how to carry out this task.

Who better than our Lord to give us this direction? Given the numerous examples in scripture of Jesus opening up God's kingdom in surprising ways, it seems to me that we are supposed to take these keys and unlock the doors of God's kingdom. Pointing to the example of Jesus himself, we should make the most of our responsibility. The church is called to share God's radical grace with this world, so that the world may come to know the one true God's steadfast love, mercy, and forgiveness. Far too often Christians have forgotten or obscured that mission and our identity. Christians have withheld the keys to the kingdom from others either because of fear or because of a selfish wielding of power over others. However, today's story in Caesarea Philippi tells us a few things. The need to proclaim "Jesus is Lord" is greater than our fears. The proclamation "Jesus is Lord" dismantles our infatuation with acquired power, because the church points to the one whose glory is revealed by submission to a cross.

We are living invitations for people outside the church to hear the good news of God. Through us, people can come to know the loving God who pursues them. The loving God whose power is revealed through service. The loving God who has defeated death. The world needs to hear the news that Jesus is Lord. Not death, and not any Caesar who deifies himself. Nothing shall prevail against that proclamation. Thanks be to God. Amen.