

Upon This Rock
Sermon on Matthew 16:13-20 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 21, 2005

When we go out for lunch, my friends never ask me to drive. That's not simply because I have a tendency to drive no more than five miles an hour over the speed limit, keep my turn indicator on long after I have completed the turn, or because I make soft chewing noises while I drive. They all run to someone else's car because if they get into mine, they know they will be subjected to listening to National Public Radio. I think that's the main difference between Baptists and Methodists, by the way. Baptists listen to Christian radio, Methodists listen to NPR.

And one of my favorite NPR programs is called "The World," one of whose regular features is the Geo Quiz, which gives you a set of clues about someplace in the world, and the object is to guess what that place is. The other day the Geo Quiz was looking for a town in Georgia and a town in England that shared the same name. I was devastated that I couldn't come up with Oxford—Duh! How humiliating for a Wesley scholar and graduate of Emory University whose two-year college is in Oxford, Georgia.

But that got me to thinking about what names say about a place. Oxford, Georgia clearly has academic pretensions. Flat Earth and Levelland, Texas, pretty much tells it as it is, which is perhaps more than one can say for poor Wichita Falls. So I wonder how many poets live in Poetry or how many millionaires live in Nickel. And will the folks in Telephone now have to change the town's name to Cell Phone?

I got to wondering about the importance of place names because Jesus asked his disciples two important questions when they got to the district of Caesarea Philippi. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Jesus wanted to know (Mt. 16:13). And more importantly, "Who do you say that I am?" (16:15). Of course, those are important questions anywhere you go, but they

are particularly important to Matthew who regards the question of Jesus' identity as an essential aspect of faith. To believe in Jesus, you must first understand who Jesus is.

And so Jesus wants to know who people think he is. "Well," said the disciples, "some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (16:14). As they might say out in Levelland, that's pretty tall cotton. Jesus is in good, highly respectable company, rather unlike the scribes' and the Pharisees' complaint about Jesus having friends in low places. Public opinion regarded Jesus as John the Baptist, the "startling and controversial preacher of the kingdom."¹ Or if not John the Baptist then Elijah, "fabled helper of the weak and forerunner of the last times."² Others said he was Jeremiah, the great Old Testament prophet who suffered because of his critique of the religious leaders and climate of his day. The undecided voters decided that Jesus must at least be numbered among the prophets.

All of these associations have merit, and all of them suggest something true about Jesus. Yes, Jesus preached the kingdom of heaven. Yes, Jesus helped the poor and weak. Yes, Jesus criticized the religious leaders and climate of his day. But all of these are ultimately inadequate to answer the question of who Jesus is.

So Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "But you, who do you say that I am?" John Chrysostom, one of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church, points out that Jesus does not ask this question at the start of his ministry, "but only after he had done many miracles, had talked through with them many lofty teachings, and had given them many clear proofs of his divinity and of his union with the Father." This wasn't a pop quiz or a surprise exam. It was a call for judgment about who Jesus is based on everything the disciples had seen and experienced: Jesus teaching, healing, casting out demons, feeding multitudes, walking on water, stilling storms, and

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 184.

² Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg New Testament Commentaries (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989) 198.

raising the dead. Surely by now they had some idea of who Jesus is. “You. Who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16). He could not have given a better answer. It is “a strong affirmation of faith,”³ a ringing declaration that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. As Messiah, or Christ in Greek, Jesus is God’s anointed one, the person God installs in the office of Israel’s king. As Son of God, Jesus is a human being like us, who nonetheless has a special relationship with God, one so intimate that he participates in God’s own nature. As Son of the living God, Jesus is related to the God who is the source of all life, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Peter confesses that Jesus is the one person to whom all of Israel’s history and hopes point, the God-appointed king who would bring about God’s mission of liberation for his chosen and beloved people.

What Peter said about Jesus, about his being Messiah and Son of God, however, he said in Caesarea Philippi. And the name of a town can tell you a lot about that place. Long, long ago, the city had been called Baal Gad or Baal Hermon because it had been a cultic site for the worship of the pagan god Baal. When the Greeks settled it, they called it Panias for Pan, the god of nature and shepherds who was worshiped at a cave and a spring in the area. After 20 B.C. the Roman emperor Augustus gave the district to Herod the Great, who subsequently built a magnificent marble temple near the cave in honor of the emperor. The city passed from Herod to his son, Philip, who enlarged the city and named it Caesarea in honor of the emperor.

Peter’s confession, then, occurs in the shadow of Caesar’s temple—of a man, a king, who claimed to be a god. Peter is challenging that claim, and the claim of any who want to have power over us. Peter is saying that Jesus is the only true king, that only he has power over us.

³ Epiphanius, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 1b, Matthew 14-28*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 45.

That kind of claim can get a person killed. It was the claim that got Jesus and not a few of his followers killed. And yet the church, that band of Jesus' followers who confess that Jesus is Messiah, could not be silenced, could not be killed. Because the church follows Jesus, the Son of the living God, even "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (16:18). We can boldly speak the name of Jesus before all those powers that threaten us harm and even death because Jesus defeated those powers at the cross of Calvary. Jesus is the Son of the living God, the God who is the source of all life, the God who creates life even in the midst of death. "Jesus shares his own indestructible life with members of his community,"⁴ thus even death cannot finally defeat the church of God.

And so we gather as a people and at a place called church. And the name of a thing can tell you a lot about that thing. We are a people who confess that Jesus is more than a wise teacher, a social and religious critic, or even a revolutionary. We are a people who confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of the living God, who defeats all the forces of death. Upon this rock God will build his church.

⁴ Smith, 201.