

Sermon – 08/23/20

Text – Matthew 16:13-20

Theme – “Blessed Peter”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The title for today’s sermon is “Blessed Peter”. Next week it will be “Cursed Peter”. That’s because our friend, Simon Peter, does a typical “Peter” thing: one moment he is full of faith, and the next he is not. Remember a couple of weeks back, when our Gospel reading was about Peter walking on the water – he was able to do that as long as he was focused on Christ, but soon he instead took his gaze off of Jesus and so he began to sink.

Or think of Maundy Thursday, when he brags he will never fall away even if all the rest of the disciples did. And he actually backed that up later that night in Gethsemane when he pulled his sword and single-handedly tried to defend Jesus from the arresting mob. But recall too how he soon cut and ran; how he skulked about in the shadows of the high priest’s courtyard, afraid even of a couple servant girls; how he eventually denied even knowing Jesus -- three times!

In today’s reading it is the same sort of thing: Peter starts off well and good, making the proper confession of who Jesus is. That gets him the blessing from Jesus that we heard. But almost immediately — as we will hear next week — Peter flubs it up by relying on himself instead of the One that he just called the Son of God. Thinking he has a better idea of what it is that the Christ, the Son of the Living God, should do, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying He is going to Jerusalem to die. *That* will earn him the “cursed” label from Jesus, when He then says to Peter: “*Get behind Me, Satan!*”

But, as I said, today we are hearing about the “good Peter”. So, what is it that Peter does that merits this blessing from Jesus? Well, Jesus has just asked the Twelve who the people thought He was.

And they give the answers they have heard: some folks see Jesus as John the Baptist (there certainly WAS many similarities in their messages). Others believed Jesus to be Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet whom God had promised would return to prepare the way for the Savior. Still others thought of Jesus as being more like Jeremiah or one of the other prophets from Israelite history. High praise, indeed, to be compared with those great men of God! For anyone else, such a comparison would truly be a great compliment.

And then Jesus asks His follow-up question: “*Who do YOU say that I am?*” Now Jesus is not just asking for the disciples to spit back what they have heard whispered by others. No, now they are being asked to make confession *themselves*. Now they are being asked to reveal what is in their own hearts. Now they are being asked what their time with Jesus has led *them* to believe about Him.

They have been with Jesus, day after day, for quite some time. They have heard all His preaching and teaching. They have seen the miracles: the sick healed, the deaf enabled to hear, the lame to walk, the blind to see, lepers cleansed. They have witnessed demons being cast out. They were even there when Jesus raised the dead to life again.

In the chapters just before this passage they had seen Jesus feed a crowd of 5000 men (plus women and children) with five loaves of bread and two small fishes, then a little later repeat the miracle for 4000 men (not to mention women and children again) with seven loaves and a few little fishes. In between, they had seen Him walking on the surface of the Sea of Galilee in a raging storm; they had witnessed Him enable Peter to walk (although only briefly) on the water too; they saw Him calm the wind and waves by His mere presence; they were there when He healed a little Canaanite girl of demon-possession at a distance.

What more evidence did they need? They have heard it all. They have seen it all. They even have had opportunity to ask Him questions, to get private tutoring and instruction to which no one else was privy. So, after all of that, Jesus asks them: Who do YOU say I am?

And up pipes our good friend, Simon Peter. He answers for the whole bunch when he says: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” Well, who else *could* Jesus be? No mere mortal could do all that they had personally witnessed Jesus doing. Yes, Jesus certainly IS the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Those words from Peter earn Jesus’ praise. He says: “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!*” How Peter’s heart must have swelled up (not to mention his head) at that. Not only was he right in his assessment of who Jesus is, but then he is singled out for praise by Christ – in front of everyone else! And then, as icing on the cake, Jesus bestows upon him that wonderful new nickname of “Peter” – the Rock. He even says He will give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven! How proud Peter must have been.

Yet, note this (which Peter apparently did not): Jesus says that none of this was revealed to Peter by human means. Peter has no cause to boast, to feel superior, to gloat. No, he is only able to see – and confess – Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, by the power and working of God: “*Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.*”

How very like Luther’s words in the Small Catechism, explaining the Third Article of the Creed!

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...

So far has sin corrupted and warped and blinded us that, on our own, we cannot recognize God even when He stands right in front of us! No, unless God had made Peter able to see who Jesus is, he never would have gotten it. The same is true for me and for you.

But the Good News is that God HAS revealed Jesus: to Peter, and to us. Like Peter, we too confess that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. God in the flesh. God come down from heaven. God come to save His people. Like Peter, whenever we make that confession (as we do again today in the Creed) we hear God saying that same word of blessing to us as He said to Peter that day near Caesarea Philippi. You are blessed because Jesus is the Son of the Living God. The Christ who has come to save you. The One who makes us alive by His grace.

And Jesus makes clear *how* He will do that, as we will hear next week. But that too is part of our confession in the Creed, isn't it? We say, we confess, we **believe** that Jesus is the Son of the Living God "...who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

And that He did all that *for us*. That is, He was made man for us. Because we could not be the perfect people God demands. And so He came in our flesh to keep the Law, to obey the commandments, to perfectly love God and man – in our place, and to give us the credit.

For us He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He put Himself onto that cross, loaded down with all of OUR sin – all of the world's sin – and there He paid the full price for all of it. The entire debt is paid. The sentence for our sin was served, by Him, and we are set free. But at what a cost! Every bit of suffering, every consequence of sin, all of our punishment and hell was there, on Him! What anguish He endured! What suffering was His, as He cried out: "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" But what love it is that moved Him to it!

For us, He descended into hell. Not to suffer, but to break down the devil's door. To open the prison and release those held in Satan's lock-up. To proclaim His victory – which is ours – to the devil,

in his own house. You have done your worst, Satan. And you have lost! Christ has won. And His victory, His life, is ours!

For us, He rose again on the third day. What a day that was! While it appeared that Jesus had lost, that death and sin and the devil had won, Easter proved just the opposite. God has restored what Satan, what Adam, what WE had ruined. Death? Swallowed up by life, resurrected and eternal life. Sin? Satisfied and put to rest, forever. Satan? Ground under the heel he had bitten, his head now crushed, forever trampled and vanquished. See the empty tomb, and know what it means: life, for Jesus AND for you.

For us He ascended into heaven, where He rules all things. But He does so for the benefit of His beloved Bride, the Church. That means you and me. Why does the sun shine? Because God loves you. Why does the rain fall, the fields grow, and beauty surround us? Because God blesses and feeds His own. Why do we have no fear about the past, the present, or the future? Because our God rules all things. And He loves us. More than anything.

For us He will come again. To take us to be with Him forever. Not just our souls at death (though that is true too) but, even more, in the resurrection of the Last Day. When He will raise the bodies of His saints, cleansed of all sin and its poison, to live forever with Him in the new heavens and earth, the new Eden, He promises. Where we will never know pain or death or sin or Satan. Only bliss and joy eternal. With all our brothers and sisters, with our heavenly Father. Forever. And all because Jesus IS the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

That was Peter's confession. That is *your* confession. And just as Jesus said to Peter, so He says to you and me: "*Blessed are YOU...*" Not that we can feel we are better than others; we are not. No, we are sinners just as much as they – indeed, more so since we know the depth of our own sin better

than we know that of anyone else. Not that we can pat ourselves on the back for our wisdom or knowledge. No, this faith in Jesus only comes from God, not us.

Rather, this blessing from Jesus makes us even more aware of God's goodness. All we have done, yet still He loves us. All our sin, yet still He calls us. All our failure, yet still He keeps us. We are His own, and He never – never – forgets or abandons us. Every day He is there, to forgive us anew (and we need it, since we sin every day). Every day He is there to strengthen us, as we remember our baptism and how He has put His seal on us there, washing us clean and bestowing His name upon us. Every day He is there, to feed us and guide us through His Word. (pause)

Blessed Peter. Good Peter. Saint Peter. Not because of what he had done. Not even for what he had said. But blessed, good, a saint because of the faith in Christ he expressed, that he confessed. And it is the same with each of you. You are blessed. You are good. You are a saint. Because God has given you faith in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, as YOUR Savior. So rejoice and be of good cheer. Nothing – not even the gates of hell – can prevail over this Savior. Or over those who confess Him, because He fights for you. He triumphs for you. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

We continue with our next hymn, "The Church's One Foundation" (LSB #644)....