

Pentecost 14; September 10 & 11, 2017

Matthew 16:13-20

It was August of 2001. We had taken our family to see New England for vacation. We had planned most of the trip before we had gone. It was a trip that started in Boston, and continued through Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire. As we were getting close to the end of our vacation, we ended up having an open day with nothing scheduled. So, on a spur of the moment, I decided: *“Let’s drive to New York City and see what is there.”* And so, we drove toward New York City without a map (well before the days of having a GPS). As I was driving into New York City, I somehow made a wrong turn. We soon found ourselves crossing the George Washington Bridge, going from the state of New York into the state of New Jersey.

Okay. Now what? 1. Buy a map. 2. Get turned around toward New York City again. We crossed the Hudson River, through the Holland Tunnel, and out we came into Lower Manhattan. I’m not sure what I expected to see? What I saw... what a sea of taxis all honking at the same time. Maybe it wasn’t the best of idea to drive into New York City after all. By now a line of severe storms was heading towards New York City. At that point in time, I thought it would be best to head back out of the city before we got stuck in traffic and rain. The only significant building that we drove by was the world trade center. 4 weeks later (to the day) the world trade center towers were brought down by the terrorist attacks on September 11. I never would have expected to not be able to see the World Trade Center again. That experience of New York City was not what I had expected.

I wonder if the disciples felt a bit like that in our text. When Jesus asks the question in our text: **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”**, he knew he was going to teach them a lesson about what they should expect of Jesus. It is a lesson that we can also learn about what to expect from Jesus.

Matthew tells us: **“Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi.”** For this lesson, Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, about 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It’s the only time that Jesus went there with his disciples. So, why go there? The city was a city that was built by Herod. That area had an unusually beautiful setting. Surrounded by the harsh terrain of Israel, this city was different. It was lush, full of life, it was the main source of the Jordan River. Caesarea Philippi was a city that was built as a shrine to the Greek culture and its gods. It’s beautiful buildings were a sign of wealth and power. Perhaps, against the backdrop of this city, it was the perfect place for Jesus teach a lesson about another kingdom.

Then he asks his disciples a question: **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** There were a lot of people who were confused as to who Jesus was. Their answers showed that: **“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** If you look at this list of people, it’s not a bad list to be included on. These men were great preachers. These men were men of God. But these men are not Saviors. They could only point people to the Savior, but they could take people’s sins away.

Then Jesus turns to them and says: **“But what about you?” “Who do you say I am?”** Jesus is saying to his disciples: *“I don’t care what everyone thinks, what do YOU think?”* They had seen Jesus do miracles, heal the sick, raise the dead. They had listened to him preach. They saw and heard things that we can’t even imagine. They walked and talked with God. They could ask him anything that they wanted to. It seemed like a pretty simple question that had a pretty simple answer. Peter speaks up: **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** Can you imagine the smile that must have been on Jesus’ face when Peter gave that answer?

You see: that question is the ultimate question that Jesus will ask of everyone. That confession of faith – **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”** -- is the basis of all of Christianity. The church will stand or fall on that confession. If Jesus is not the promised Messiah, if he is not both God and Man sent to secure our salvation, then our faith is in vain. We might as well say ‘Amen’ here and pack up and go home. But if this confession of Peter is true, it changes everything. You see, that confession comes also comes with a promise from Jesus.

Jesus has given a guarantee to His Church. Jesus was going to build a church and not even Satan himself would be able to bring it down. There are not any other guarantees in this world that can match this guarantee of Jesus: **“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”** The Christian Church will NOT fail. Period.

The disciples were trying to wrap their hands around that promise. They got the part about him being the Savior. The part that they were struggling with is the part as to HOW Jesus was going to do this. In the verse following our text, Jesus lays out that plan. **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** Hold on now, who said anything about dying. They were still hoping that Jesus was going to be this warrior who was going to crush all their enemies. Dying? No!

The building of Christ’s church was going to be built by death; The death of the Son of God. Jesus knew what laid ahead for his disciples. It wasn’t going to be long and it would look like Satan would be getting the upper hand on Jesus. It would even seem like he was winning as he would be beaten and nailed to a cross to die. As he breathed his final breath, it would look like Satan had won. Jesus wants his disciples to know that his death would not defeat him. His death would make that promise come true: **“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”**

That same promise is there for us. The church will not fail! You can’t help but look around and watch the news and wonder if maybe God is losing control as you hear about hurricanes, and earthquakes and forest fires, and all kinds of other things in the news. But Jesus says to us: **“The gates of Hades will not overcome it.”**

Christians will go through dark times. Churches may go through dark times. The people of this world may go through dark times. But those dark times DO NOT change God’s promise: **“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”**

When I drove into New York City 16 years ago on a whim, I really didn’t know what I was getting myself into. I’ll have to admit that I was just a little overwhelmed. As we go through life, we may be overwhelmed. When those times come, remember this promise of Jesus. Then we know the answer to Jesus’ question: **“Who do you say I am?” “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** That God will never fail us EVER. Amen.