

“God Convictions”  
*Matthew 16:13-20 & Psalm 19*  
Pastor James York  
March 3, 2024

**Prayer for Understanding** Holy Word, for generations people have bowed their heads, have prayed the Psalms, have asked for your presence in their lives. For generations people have whispered, “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable and pleasing to you, O God.” For generations we have gathered here, we have quieted our minds, we have prayed to feel your presence in our midst. So once again, just as the generations before, we turn our hearts to your Word. Still our busy minds so that we might truly comprehend what you have to say to us today. With joy and hope we pray, Amen.

Praise God’s calling, rescuing, steadfast, everlasting, transforming love. Peter’s spiritual journey climbs yielding a mountaintop experience of God. Peter enjoyed euphoria and friendship with God. Peter proclaims who Jesus is. Peter speaks with conviction. Peter declares Jesus to be God a savior and claims his identity as a beloved child of God. It is a “thin moment” for Peter where the glory of God is glimpsed.

If you had to speak your faith in one sentence, what would you say? When we have the courage to say, “This, I believe...” then that conviction has a ripple effect in our thoughts and transforms the way one lives. No one can change another person. However, when one changes themselves, often those in a relationship with the changed person will choose to change as well. Therefore, a transformed person often transforms others. Jesus responded to Peter’s conviction by promising to give him more glimpses of heaven through portals of love. When life gets rocky, often it is through our mountaintop moments and our deepest convictions that God sustain us and guides us through.

When it comes to professions of faith, a healthy church has spacious Christianity for all. Striving to be a welcoming space for those who do not yet know what they believe, for those not ready to make a formal statement of faith, and for those who have rock solid detailed conviction of faith. A healthy spacious Christianity church makes room for a wide array of convictions, viewpoints and perceptions striving to learn from each other and never judging another. A healthy spacious Christianity church encourages people to speak up about their relationship with God, who Jesus is for them and what Jesus is calling them to be and do. Peter shows us that conviction matters even when it is not completely accurate.

If you had to speak your faith in one sentence, what would you say? Do you believe in forgiveness? Do you believe love has the power to change lives? Do you think the world is in need of grace? Do you believe we are called to love ourselves, love all people and love God. Whatever you believe say it with conviction to yourself. Through that conviction God will help you live what you believe. Whatever you believe say it with conviction to others. And listen to their convictions. It is a Presbyterian conviction that this process is the way we discover God’s desire for our life. We listen to each other, we pray, we discuss and repeat the process over and over, striving to grow in living like Christ.

A Presbyterian conviction is that all who trust in God’s grace in Jesus shall be welcomed into membership. No additional beliefs are required. And a Presbyterian conviction is that more detailed statements of faith are life giving. Ambiguity can lead to apathy, so share what you believe. **Matthew 16:13-20 NLT** “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Then Jesus asked them,

**“But who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because God in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.” Then Jesus sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”**

Biblical scholars, pastors, and readers of this text are all over the place on what is happening, what it means, and what God is inviting us to do or be. We could explore these vast array of perceptions for days. If the Holy Spirit is revealing something to you different than what I am sharing, then please go with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For brevity, I am going to exclude the perhaps, mights, and maybes. Please remember all of what follows is one possible interpretation.

Peter’s declaration, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”** is nothing new and Peter’s understanding is partially inaccurate. The disciples and Peter already declared Jesus to be the son of living God after Jesus helped them through the storm. The coming promised messiah was a common belief, that an anointed one from the line of David would be king and deliver certain people from foreign oppression. In an upcoming adventure with Peter, we will observe that this is what Peter was implying with declaring Jesus to be the Messiah. In that instance, Peter is rebuked by Jesus for his misunderstanding of messiah. Jesus is more than an earthly savior for certain people. Jesus is the savior that saves all humanity from sin.

Matthew often has Peter speaking on behalf of all the disciples and all follower of Christ, including us. If Peter only had a partial, distorted understanding of Messiah and the declaration of Jesus as the Son of the living God has already been made then what is Jesus blessing and affirming in Peter, the disciples and us? Is it the journey? So far the journey has entailed: Answering the call to strive to follow Jesus; Having the courage to follow over to the other side, to repent, to change; Overcoming fear, striving to be full hearted, asking for help, taking risks to love, risks to go through the storm, risks to create a calm, peaceful world where all can freely worship. And Jesus is affirming the conviction, that boldly stating what one believes even if it is still being formulated, distorted and incomplete is important. Affirming the quest to learn, love, and be joyful.

Jesus blesses Simion, the disciples, all followers and us, giving Peter a new name. We all receive a new name which includes Christian when we are baptized for we are sealed into the family of God, we belong to God’s eternal family, our identity is being a beloved child of God. Our identity as God’s cherished child gives us perseverance to keep going through the constant onslaught of earthly storms. Being God’s beloved, affirms our self-worth, gives us purpose, and fills our life with meaning.

Jesus calls Peter, the disciples, all followers and us the rocks which are the church. Peter elaborates stating in scripture. **1 Peter 2:5 “You are living stones that God is building into God’s spiritual temple. What’s more, you are God’s holy messengers. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual blessings that please God.”**

Followers of Christ are to be messengers of the good news of great joy sharing God’s redeeming grace with all people. Heaven is equality, all people living in perfect loving, joyful, peaceful relationship with self, all people and God. Hell is inequality, judgment, division, and sorting of people. Heaven will prevail over hell. The followers of Jesus are called to partner with God in bringing heaven to everyone.

Jesus gives Peter, the disciples, all followers and us the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Our love unlocks portals to heaven revealing more of the glory of God. The more we follow Jesus the more of heaven is unlocked and enjoyed. God honors free will so the areas of our life, society and cosmos that we permit God to bless are transformed, redeemed and resurrected. The areas of our life, society and cosmos we forbid God from transforming stay locked until our experiences of grace move us to let God

transform, redeem and resurrect all, which is what Jesus was urging the disciples to do when he told them be full hearted.

Each of us is created in the image of God. You are a rock that God is partnering with and building upon. What specifically is Jesus building with you? What unique keys has Jesus given to you to unlock a portal of heavenly glory to bless humanity?

Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone else he was the Messiah because Jesus knew the disciples were thinking of an earthly savior for certain people and had not yet expanded their heart to perceive Jesus as an eternal savior of everyone, freeing all people from sin and every form of hell to eternal perfection, love and heaven. Jesus knew the disciples could not yet fathom the transformative, cosmos perfecting love they would be able to bless everyone with when they open themselves to God, partnered with God and loved with conviction.

Psalm 19 is a prayer for those seeking God, desiring transformation and eager to proclaim God's redeeming grace. **Psalm 19 NLT "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display God's craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make God known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world. God has made a home in the heavens for the sun. It bursts forth like a radiant bridegroom after his wedding. It rejoices like a great athlete eager to run the race. The sun rises at one end of the heavens and follows its course to the other end. Nothing can hide from its heat. The instructions of the Lord are perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The commandments of the Lord are right, bringing joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight for living. Reverence for the Lord is pure, lasting forever. The laws of the Lord are true; each one is fair. They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb. They are a warning to your servant, a great reward for those who obey them. How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults. Keep your servant from deliberate sins! Do not let them control me. Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.**

"Praise the Mount"

*a poem by Sarah Speed*

I have stayed quiet before.

I have held my tongue while passing mountains.

I have slipped my hands deep into pockets, despite the music that invites me to dance.

I have glimpsed a new moon and a new love and have acted as if it was something other than a complete, God-given miracle.

But not today.

Not today.

Today I will dance.

Today I will tap my toes all the way to heaven's gates.

Today I will point out every shade of gold and periwinkle that we pass.

Today I will talk about my faith like we talk about the weather—early and unprompted, comfortable and unashamed.

Today I will tell you that God did such a good job with freckles, willow trees, and your entire being.

And I will not be embarrassed by my own conviction.

I will not swallow my praise.

I have stayed quiet before, but not today. Today I will sing.

Art conveys an array of insights and typically unique insights for each person. Look at the art on the bulletin cover portraying today's scripture. We will take a minute of silence to be inspired. What do you perceive? What is God inviting you to do or be through this art? *Minute of Silence*

The artist Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman writes. "I do not know if this was a moment of clarity for Peter, if he was regurgitating the answer he thought Jesus wanted to hear, or if he was trying to convince himself that dropping everything and following this man was worth it, but I imagine this was a breakthrough for Peter. I wanted to capture this as a moment of seeing and being seen. Jesus sees him as more than Simon, a fisher and son of Jonah, and renames him Peter, the blessed foundation through which his ministry would take root and continue to grow. Jesus sees Peter through the eyes of God. Peter sees Jesus as more than a teacher and companion. Peter sees through the veil of confusion concerning Jesus' identity. Peter does not see Jesus as the reincarnation of a former prophet, or another contemporary baptizer pointing the way. Peter names Jesus as the "anointed one," the one his people have so desperately longed for. Peter proclaims Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God. In this image, I wanted to create a kaleidoscope of perception, imaging the ways Jesus is perceived in the context of this passage, like light broken down into a myriad of shapes and colors. In the gold rays of light Jesus' form is obscured by the metallic shine of God's glory. In the gray and earth-tone rays Jesus is seen in monochrome. Each of the earth-tone rays holds a pattern on Jesus' clothing which represents a misunderstanding of who Jesus is. Starting on the left, honey, locusts, and baptismal waters misidentify him as John the Baptist. Within the next ray to the right, ravens, an empty chair, rain, and fires from the heavens misidentify Jesus as Elijah. On the right, scales of justice and plants being uprooted and planted misidentify Jesus as Jeremiah. Through the middle of the image, there is a ray of light where the image comes into full color that holds this moment of clarity where Jesus and Peter truly see one another. In this ray, Peter's clothing holds symbols of his new identity: a rock upon which the church will be built and keys to the kingdom. Jesus' clothing holds imagery—an oil jar and the light of the sun—representing the way Peter sees Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God."

Simon was a wanderer, uncertain and viewed the world through a binary lens. Simon's journey enabled him to become Peter who sees God's glory, proclaims God's glory with conviction and affirms the diverse complexity of God's resurrecting love. God is in every part of your life. Where do you perceive God? How have you experienced God's love? You are being found, being rescued from sinking and will make profound convictions. Who are you, Lord? is the question of a lifetime to ask and experience over and over again. Amen