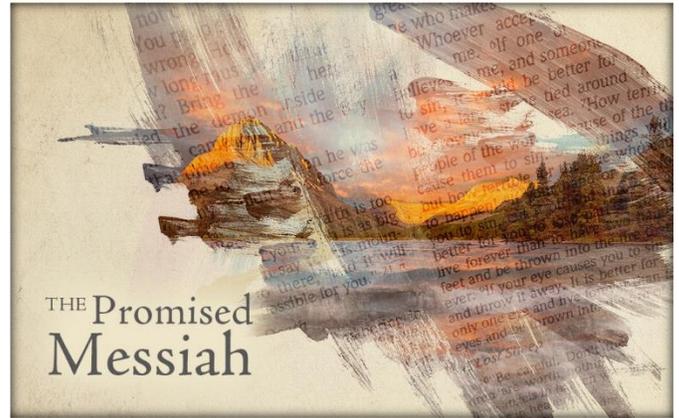


“The Promised Messiah”

Matthew 16:13-18; Matthew 17:1-9

“But who do you say that I am?”

The first of today’s Scripture passages is the central scene in an extended narrative in Matthew’s Gospel (13:53–17:27). Amidst significant opposition from those who are blind to his mission, Jesus works to form a new community of God’s people. This community will be comprised of those who respond to the Good News and embrace Jesus’ new way of being the people of God.



After confronting Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to test him, Jesus, with his disciples, retreated to the region of Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is. Clearly, the populace has a very high opinion of Jesus. Some think he is John the Baptist, who had announced the coming of the Messiah. Others think Jesus is Elijah, the great prophet of Israel (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2). Elijah had not died, but had ascended to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:9-12) and was expected to return to usher in God’s kingdom (Malachi 4:5). Still others among the Galileans think Jesus is Jeremiah, another of Israel’s great prophets, who had pronounced judgment on Israel and Solomon’s Temple at the time of the temple’s destruction in 587BC. Though the people held Jesus in high esteem, they did not see Jesus as the Anointed One, God’s Messiah -- the returning king who would usher in the kingdom of God.

Peter’s confession

Though the populace does not yet grasp Jesus’ true identity, in Matthew’s Gospel at least,¹ the disciples are beginning to see. Some time earlier, the disciples had seen Jesus walk on water in the midst of a storm, provoking them to worship Jesus and say, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:22-36). But now, in a peaceful setting, Jesus asks his disciples directly “Who do *you* say that I am?” Perhaps speaking for them all or perhaps speaking only for himself, Simon Peter states his belief—his confession—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.² Jesus responds by blessing Simon, proclaiming that his confession, his understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, is the work of God, who has revealed this to Simon. But...has God revealed everything about Jesus and his vocation to Simon? Evidently not; for not long after this, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must suffer. Peter didn’t understand this or didn’t what to. Jesus rebuked Simon Peter for being a “stumbling block,” even calling him “Satan” (Matthew 16:21-23).

Jesus’ promise

After blessing Simon, Jesus tells him, “you are Peter,³ and on this rock, I will build my church . . .” This verse has proved to be one of the most controversial in the New Testament. Does Jesus mean that Peter himself is the rock on whom the church will be built? Or does “this” refer to Peter’s confession, his belief that Jesus is the Messiah? Because the Roman Catholic Church has always used this verse to support the papacy, Protestants have tended to prefer the latter understanding. Perhaps a better approach is to understand that it is the *confessing Peter* on whom Jesus will build his church.

Certainly, in the gospels, Peter played the primary role among the disciples. In addition, he was the early leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem and Judea. On the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who rose to deliver the first great proclamation of the young church (Acts 2). But Jesus has more in mind than just Peter

¹ In Mark’s Gospel, Peter’s confession is the first acknowledgement of Jesus’ true identity.

² Peter’s confession that Jesus is the “Son of the Living God” is not an affirmation of Jesus’ divinity, but an affirmation of Jesus’ royalty. To a first-century Jew, the Messiah was a kingly figure, but not a divine one. The kings of Israel were sometimes referred to as a “son of God.”

³ This is a word play. See the p. 2 text box.

the man. It is the believing Peter around whom Jesus will form his new community, his church (*ekklesia* in the Greek). This imagery of foundations and churches is used by many of the New Testament writers. Paul reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who is the foundation (1 Cor 3:11). For the writer of Ephesians, Jesus is the cornerstone of God’s household which is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (2:20).

We needn’t be troubled by these varied metaphors. Jesus is Lord and all things must point to him. His church is comprised of people who confess that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, who carry on God’s work of renewing and restoring all humanity and creation. Jesus promised Peter and the other disciples that even the “gates of Hades” would not prevail against his church. Hades is the place of the dead, not a place of punishment – these are the “gates of death” (Isaiah 38:10; Job 38:17). Death, having come through sin (Gen. 3:3), symbolizes the powers of evil. Jesus promises that even though we battle evil every day and in many forms, his church will endure and will never be conquered. These are words of great comfort and profound encouragement.

The Transfiguration

Simon Peter

The disciple we know as Simon Peter was born just Simon (actually, Simeon in Hebrew); the son of a man named Jonah. We know little from the Bible about Simon’s life before he met Jesus. We know that he and his brother, Andrew, worked as fishermen in the Sea of Galilee. Simon lived in Capernaum and spoke with a Galilean accent. He was married and his wife’s mother lived with them. In the Gospels, Simon Peter is seen as the central figure among the disciples.

Nonetheless, it is Simon Peter who would three times deny even knowing Jesus after Jesus’ arrest. After Pentecost, Peter led the church in Jerusalem. He carried the Good News throughout Judea and brought the first uncircumcised Gentile to faith in Christ, a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10).

“Peter” was a nickname given Simon by Jesus. The nickname meant “rock,” which was *Cephas* in Aramaic—the everyday language of Jesus and his disciples—*Petros* in Greek, and Peter in English. At the time, Peter was not used as a proper name in Palestine.

Three of Jesus’ disciples, Peter and James and John, had known each other for their whole lives. They had grown up in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter had gotten it right. God had revealed this truth to him. (Matthew 16:13-20). Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews knew the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews knew that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum knew all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

Rock my world!

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk.

“Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron—two words that simply didn’t go together—like “Jumbo Shrimp”! The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter “Satan” for

suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.⁴ Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question—can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”⁵ The disciples's world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

It is a difficult thing to let go, to let God, to trust God fully. We imagine that we are in control of every aspect of our lives, only to be confronted by the incomprehensible and unimaginable. Perhaps on the mountainside Peter was reminded of his own finiteness, and it scared him to his core. Perhaps he realized that his world was truly being turned upside-down and that he had little or no idea where it, or he, was headed. Regardless, Jesus told him to stand, to set aside his fears, and to draw comfort from Jesus' mere touch. In the same way, we can loosen our own grip on life's troubles and take Jesus' hand, trusting in his love, remembering that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

A Theophany?

A theophany is a manifestation of God. A pillar of fire, a cloud, a burning bush, even a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9-18). The cloud and the voice in the transfiguration story are theophanies. It is God made visible to our senses.

But Jesus' transfiguration is not a theophany. D. A. Hare speaks of the transfiguration as a “Christophany.” Jesus' transfiguration is not about his divinity, it is about his Messiahship. Jesus stands alongside Moses and Elijah. No Jew would have considered either of them to be divine. Jesus is a transformed human in the transfiguration, but he is still human. Peter speaks to Jesus as he always did. It is not Jesus' transformed appearance that strikes fear in Peter and the others. They collapse only after the cloud and the voice.

This may seem rather unimportant to you. But this is one more example of how we can get off track unless we realize that no Jew of Jesus' day conceived of the Messiah as being divine. The Messiah might have been God's hand-picked #2, but the Messiah was to be human. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he is not declaring Jesus to be divine. Our reading of the Gospels will be made much clearer if we keep this in mind.

⁴ Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.

⁵ This repeats the words spoken to Jesus as his baptism (Matthew 3:17) with the addition of “Listen to him.” The purpose of the Transfiguration is to point the disciples to Jesus' teaching, to the word. This incredible experience that Peter, James, and John share has value only if it leads them toward obedience to Jesus' teachings. If Jesus says he must suffer and die, then Peter and the others must accept that as the path forward. [from D. A. Hare's commentary on Matthew in the *Interpretation* series.]