

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 23, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

"The Son of the Living God"

I have had the blessing of visiting Caesarea Philippi twice – and witnessing the pagan shrines that are there. The first time we went in 1999, I was a pilgrim, along with Marilyn and our two kids – John and Theresa – and we took it all in. The second time, in 2014 when we went, Marilyn and I took a different stance, as a priest, our guide let me do a lot of the teaching and I was able to teach a lot of what you are going to hear today in this message, at the site where it took place. This is located in the very northern part of Israel, not far from the Lebanon border. This area is filled with antiquity. Not far from the center of pagan worship is an ancient city gate from the time of Abraham, when he went there to rescue his nephew Lott, as mentioned in Genesis 14:14 – all the way from Canaan to the Dan.

This was an area that was steeped in pagan worship, first with Baal worship and then replaced with the worship of Greek fertility gods. Caesarea Philippi, which stood in a lush area near the foot of Mount Hermon, became the religious center for pagan worship of the Greek god, Pan. The Greeks named the city Panias in his honor. It was years later, when Romans conquered this areas, Herod Philip rebuilt the city and named it after himself. He did that in order to differentiate this from Caesarea Marittima on the coast, it was named Caesarea Philippi, but it continued to focus on worship of Greek gods. In the cliff that stood above the city, the local people built shrines and temples to their god, Pan. There is more background information that we need to know about this place. To those who worshipped here, they believed that the cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where fertility gods lived during the winter – in the spring they believed that things changed. They committed absolutely detestable acts to worship these false gods. Caesarea Philippi's location stood at the base of a cliff where spring water flowed. At one time, the water ran directly from the mouth of a cave set in the bottom of the cliff. Those people commonly believed that their fertility gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring. They saw water as a symbol of the underworld and thought that their gods traveled to and from that world through caves. They believed that their city was literally at the gates of the underworld – or more commonly, the gates of hell. We will hear them referred to as the “gates of Hades” in just a few moments. In order to try to bring the return of their god, Pan, each year, the people of Caesarea Philippi engaged in horrible deeds, including prostitution and sexual interaction between humans and goats.

It is so important for us to understand that when Jesus brought his disciples to this area, they must have been shocked and reviled. It really must have been disgusting to them because they knew what took place here. Caesarea Philippi was like a red-light district in their world and devout Jews would have avoided any contact with the despicable acts committed there. If you remember last week, I spoke about how Jews avoided contact with Gentiles at all costs. This really was a city of people eagerly knocking on the doors of hell. It was disgusting.

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So why did Jesus ask His disciples “*who do people say the Son of Man is?*” Before you answer, remember where they are – and one more thing I need to mention is this place is at the foot of Mount Hermon, whose snow peaks provide the water that runs down and becomes the Jordan River. It will play an important role in the days to come – Mount Hermon. May I suggest to you that Jesus was asking His disciples to identify Him, right in front of one of the most evil places in their world, and to realize the truth – in the face of this evil. They responded what others were saying responding, “*Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*” (Matthew 16:14) Jesus challenged them further by asking them point blank. I can just imagine Jesus looking them square in the eye and asking them this question: “*But what about you?*” he asked. “*Who do you say I am?*” (Matthew 16:15) We read that Peter jumped right in, like he did at the lake in the storm, and answered, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” (Matthew 16:16) Remember that Christ is a Greek word – “*kristos,*” and it is the same as the Hebrew word “*Messiach*” – Messiah, which means “*anointed One.*” So basically he is saying “*you are the anointed one – the Son of God.*” Jesus then blessed Simon Peter, the son of Jonah, and acknowledged that the words that Peter spoke were the truth, inspired by God the Father, and the foundation, or rock, upon which Jesus would build His church. Not Peter, but the words that he spoke!

Now - all of that information that I shared with you as background of Caesarea Philippi comes into play. Jesus tells them that His church will not be torn apart by the pagan beliefs and practices that consume the world around them. At this place, they are right in the midst of some of the most horrible things, and Jesus is making the commitment to them that pagans, their beliefs, and their evil spiritual practices will not overcome His church, but instead it will prevail. I cannot help but think that this point had to really hit home for them – especially as they are standing in the very seat of that evil – Caesarea Philippi. As a matter of fact, in the words following today’s Holy Gospel, Jesus then tells them that He must go to Jerusalem and face the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the Law – and that He must be killed by them. He also adds that on the third day He will be raised to life. There is a lot for them to take in and to think about. What a commitment! Jesus is promising His disciples, and us as well, that those having faith in Him will outlast those who oppose Him and His church, whether from Jerusalem or pagan capitols. They may kill His body, but His church will prevail – as will His Word.

Knowing and recognizing Jesus for who He really is - changes people – but I must tell you that giving your life to Him will transform you - you will never be the same again! Many of you have stories and have told us about how God has transformed you. Last week I talked about how each one of us has a “before.” Before we met Jesus – how we were and how we are today. His transformation changes us – and there is no one that is beyond His transformation. Knowing and fully accepting Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, The Prophet Ezekiel told people what to expect from the Messiah and what God promises through him: “*Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* (Ezekiel 36:26) Knowing and truly accepting Jesus as the Messiah – the Son of the living God, if you remember – those were

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Peter's words, acknowledging our sins and turning away from them, can and will change a person – with a new heart and a new life.

In just six days from this event at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would take Peter, James and John up a mountain, which I believe was nearby Mount Hermon, and He would show them something beyond their imagination – He would be transfigured right on front of them, to show them just what the Son of God looks like, and He would stand there between Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the Prophets. Peter's words would I am sure become emblazoned on these apostles hearts – seeing what they saw. For all of the frailties in Peter's character- one thing would be true – the words that he spoke, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" (Matthew 16:16) as well as the words that he proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost would indeed be the foundation – or the “rock” upon which Jesus built His church. Three thousand people accepted Jesus on the Day of Pentecost because of that truth – and then the millions that were to follow – including you and me.