

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 27, 2017, Year A

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

***“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”***

The city of Caesarea Philippi is in the northern most part of Israel, right near the border of Lebanon. This place is special to me as I have been there twice, and the last time in 2014 I was able to do the teaching. Located 25 miles northeast of Nazareth, it is in hills of the Dan region, about 1,500 feet above the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is the second lowest place below sea level on the face of the earth; the lowest is the Dead Sea. It was one of the biggest centers of Pagan belief – with a shrine to Augustus Caesar and a very ornate shrine to the Greek god – Pan, built out of the mountainside. You can still see these to this day. There was this huge cut in the mountainside where pagans went to worship. It was a variety of religions. Long before all of this was built up it was a place of Baal worship, and it is my belief that Baal is another name for Beelzebub, Beelzebub or Satan – and there were 14 temples to Baal alone. In this area is a large fresh water spring that joins with the water coming down from the mountains to form the Jordan River and not far from this place is a very high mountain, which is snow peaked for much of the year, – Mount Hermon, which many believe to be the place of the Transfiguration. For many reasons, this is a very important place and it is the place where Peter answers a most important question regarding the identity of Jesus. Jesus asks the disciples “*who do you say that I am?*” Peter proclaims that “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*” Peter was very ready to jump at opportunities – like getting out of the boat – wanting to build three booths for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus at the Transfiguration. Remember – he was also the one to readily deny Christ three times. This was not the time for Peter’s answer to carry the weight that it would later. Peter and the others had some growing to do for their answers to speak volumes. You see --- I believe that actions speak louder than words!

The apostles were expecting the Christ, God’s anointed One, the Chosen Messiah to be a conqueror, a ruler – one on whose right-hand side they could sit – and their hopes and dreams were shattered when He was crucified, died and buried – and so they ran and hid. Jesus had just told them that He was “*the Way, and the Truth, and the Life*” (John 14:6) and now He was gone. What they didn’t know was that Jesus was going to prove to them through His actions – by dying on the cross and then rising from the dead – that He really was the Messiah! All they knew was that the One who they trusted for three years was dead and gone. Can you imagine the questions swirling in their heads? How could they trust His promises when He was dead and in the tomb? God surely would never let His Chosen King suffer such torture and then be brutally killed. The Jewish Encyclopedia says that “*the Jews yearned for the promised deliverer of the house of David, who would free them from the yoke of the hated foreign usurper, would put an end to the impious Roman rule, and would establish His own reign of peace and justice in its place.*” That was the mind set or world view of the Jewish people of that day.

The disciples knew the Scriptures and they knew what God had said of His Messiah through Malachi: “*See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly*

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*the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.*" (Malachi 3:1)

Jesus had told them that HE was going to suffer and die – but every word went right over their heads. They even missed what God had said through the Prophet Isaiah about His suffering servant and how He would be treated. *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:3-5) The Lord goes on to say *"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities."* (Isaiah 53:11)

All they knew was that they were alone; and now what? Who was this Jesus that they were following? And what about His promises?

C.S. Lewis, the author of "The Chronicles of Narnia" in his book *"Mere Christianity"* wrote about Jesus. He was a science fiction writer and an atheist, until he came to Christ – through his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, who he shared a pint with at the famous "Eagle and Child" in Oxford. He did come to Christ and so he wrote this: *"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg--or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice."* Simply put Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic or He is Lord!

Something significant happened to change these men from cowering, doubting, hurting, and hiding people into bold men who let their actions speak louder than words. These eyewitnesses were transformed. English theologian and author, Bishop N.T. Wright said *"How do we explain the fact that this movement has spread like wildfire with Jesus as the Messiah, even though Jesus had been crucified? The answer has to be, it can only be, because He was raised from the dead."*

These men came out of their hiding in the Upper Room and were different - no longer wimps – but men of courage who knew something and were totally changed by it. Why would 11 men who followed Jesus suddenly come out of hiding and be willing to lay it all on the line – to be willing to die? There are some who explain it as a conspiracy in which they made up a lie and decided to stick to it. Let's face it - before He was nailed to the cross, Jesus was beaten so severely that it should have killed Him, yet He walked out of the grave. Would you die for a lie? I wouldn't! Eleven original Apostles and Matthias, except for John, all died horrible, torturous deaths for their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and King, as God.

Conspiracy? I don't think so! Why would you die for something that was not true?

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, August 27, 2017, Year A

The Apostle Peter was there when he saw the Risen Jesus, and He walked with Jesus. He wrote it this way: *“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”* (2 Peter 1:16) These men, especially on the Day of Pentecost on which they received the Power of the Holy Spirit, were totally changed, totally transformed. From that time on - actions spoke louder than words!

There is one more man who needs to be discussed who was the greatest enemy the church has ever known – Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a Pharisee who hunted down believers of Jesus and dragged them in chains back to Jerusalem to be punished or worse yet, executed. He agreed with and witnessed the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 & 8. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus to hunt down believers and bring them back to judgment, in chains, when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus saying *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* And he said, *“Who are You, Lord?”* And He said, *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”* (Acts 9:4-6) In an instant Saul was floored and transformed into Paul, the Apostle – who became an integral disciple – making other disciples and preaching the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ to Jew and Gentile alike.

The Apostle Paul describes the transformation of all of the Apostles – including himself: *“He (Jesus) appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. The Apostles vision had been too small. Suddenly they saw the larger truth. Paul looked down on the despised Gentiles as inferior to God’s chosen people. Paul saw that the Christ who appeared to him on the road to Damascus was indeed the Savior of all people.”* (1 Corinthians 15:5) They were given new eyes through which to see the truth!

So, what does this have to do with all of us? 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! 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, (remember – those were 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.

There are a lot of people who know all the buzz words, who know what the answers should be when they are asked, to keep others at bay– but they have never really given themselves to Jesus. They know what to say when someone asks them “are you saved?” If they were asked “If you were going to die tonight – do you know where you would go?” They know the answer to take the heat off, and they know where to find the readings and maybe even come up and receive Holy Communion - but they continue to hold a part of themselves back. Call it doubt or stubbornness – but they never let go! I have often spoken about the picture of Jesus standing at the door and knocking, that goes with Revelation 3:20 – you know the one – there’s no handle

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or knob on the outside – because the person on the inside must open it and invite Jesus in! Pushing against that door to keep it closed will not get you to heaven. Opening the door and inviting Jesus into your life as the “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” will - He is the ONLY way to the Father – there is no other way! If you haven’t opened that door – you need to let Him in – TODAY! That will join Christ in you and you in Christ. If you already have accepted Jesus, will you please pray for those who have yet to come to Him. Actions speak louder than words!

The Apostle Paul wrote to the people of Corinth about this very transformation saying, *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”* (2 Corinthians 5:17) Inviting Jesus into your heart is the only way to eternal life – any other choice leads to eternal death. It is that simple. I know it sounds like “Is it really that simple?” The answer is YES! If you are on the fence, wavering, not wanting to let go – make today the day of your new birth in Him as Lord of your life – and your eternal life! Actions speak louder than words! Peter answered: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”* He backed it up, for on the Day of Pentecost he told the truth to the crowds and three thousand people came to accept Jesus that day. Actions speak louder than words!