

"Between a Rock and a Hard Place , " A Sermon based on Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; and Matthew 16:13-20 delivered at The First Congregational UCC of Onekama on August 23, 2026 by the Reverend Alison Dutton Jacobs.

As we heard in our Gospel lesson this morning, Peter declares a strong confession of faith in Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” at Caesarea Philippi. Peter does this in answer to Jesus’ questioning of the disciples’ view of what is his true identity. As you can imagine there was at this time much speculation as to the identity of this Galilean miracle worker, and all of the Synoptic gospels are interested in making sure that their readers know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not just another one of the prophets, but that Jesus and the Messiah are one in the same.

All three of the synoptic gospels, therefore, have Peter’s confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi and they all are worded much the same way. Even the writer of the Gospel of John takes pains to identify Jesus with the figure of the messenger of the Lord, the Messiah, as mentioned in Malachi 3: 1, but instead of using the character of Peter, John uses the confessions of Nathanael and Martha for that purpose. Matthew, however, takes all of this a bit further. Writing in the last third of the first century to a growing and established faith community—an ecclesia—a church--the gospel writer is also interested in insuring that his readers know, through the use of the character of Peter, that Jesus’ intent was to establish this church which followed his teachings.

Although there is no evidence in the earlier scriptural witnesses that Jesus had any such intention, per se, the successful work of the Apostle Paul at planting churches had by the time of writer of Matthew’s gospel made it necessary to establish a connection between the historical Jesus and these Christian churches.

Put very simply, the writer of Matthew was interested in building up the morale of a persecuted church. Jesus' rejoinder to Peter's confession, therefore, with its beautiful word play on the Greek word, Petra, meaning "rock" was meant to reassure the struggling church, in a memorable way, that Jesus was indeed behind the founding of the institution that bore the name of his title, the Christ and that it was an institution which was meant to have the strength of a rock solid faith--such as Peters confession illustrated.

Peters character throughout Matthew's Gospel is used in various ways to illustrate what it means to have faith—either of "the little faith" variety or of the rock-solid kind. In Chapter 14, when Jesus gives Peter the ability to walk on water, a capacity with which he soon flounders. Peter finds himself crying out for help to which Jesus answers by reaching out to save him while asking, "You of little faith, why do you doubt?"

This same 'doubting" Peter, whose rock-solid confession just two chapters later is pointed to as the foundation for Christs church, reverts back again quickly to a man of "little faith" in Chapter 26 on that fateful Good Friday morning when he denies, not once, not twice, but three times, that he even knows Jesus. You remember, right? He says "I do not know that man." There are very few sadder words than these in the whole scriptural witness. Peter, when faced with the persecuting world, away from the safety of his faith community, from the 'rock solid" basis he found with the other disciples by his side, denies knowledge of Jesus and thereby essentially retracts his confession. Peter, whose confession at Caesarea Philippi is called "the rock" on which Jesus will build his church, find the outside society "too hard a place" in which to sustain this confession. Peter, like us, finds himself almost literally "between a rock and a hard place." All of us can

relate to this Peter, this person of such staunch faith while in the safety of his faith community but who falls short of that “rock solid faith” when in the midst of a persecuting society.

Society is indeed a hard place in which to preach and live the gospel, but preach it we and live it we must, recognizing that we are all “sinners who fall short of the glory of God.” I grew up listening to folk singers the like of Peter, Paul and Mary and Simon & Garfunkel. One of the latter’s most well-loved ballads was entitled: “Loves Me Like a Rock” recorded in 1973. Many of you might remember the lyrics which start out like this:

*“When I was a little boy, (when I was just a boy)
And the devil would call my name (when I was just a boy)
I'd say "now who do,
Who do you think you're fooling? " (when I was just a boy)
I'm a consecrated boy (when I was just a boy)
I'm a singer in a sunday choir
Oh , my mama loves me, she loves me
She get down on her knees and hug me
Like she loves me like a rock
She rocks me like the rock of ages
And loves me
She love me, love me, love me, love me*

*When I was grown to be a man (grown to be a man)
And the devil would call my name (grown to be a man)
I'd say "now who do,
Who do you think you're fooling? " (grown to be a man)
I'm a consummated man (grown to be a man)
I can snatch a little purity
My mama loves me, she loves me
She get down on her knees and hug me
Like she loves me like a rock
She rocks me like the rock of ages
And loves me
She love me, love me, love me, love me.”*

I do not believe that we have to capitulate to society's demands in order to be considered successful. For God loves us all "Like the Rock of Ages." All that we are required to do is to answer along with Peter in his Caesarea Philippi days when asked by Jesus, "But who do you say that I am?" All we have to do is declare each time we can to anyone who will listen "You Jesus, are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"- the son of the living God--All we have to do is to declare it and then, as leave the rest in God's hands. Amen.

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