

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 27, 2023 jj
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Caesarea Philippi was a city that shouldn't have been there. It was stuck in a barren wilderness far away to the north of the Holy Land, on the road to Damascus. It was a city that was nestled under a very steep cliff, and at the bottom of the cliff was a cave. The city itself was high up on a hill and you still can see far away to the south and west from this ancient site. But the reason that it was there is not because of its magnificent vantage point, or even because of the cliff, but out of that cave gushed out a more than generous supply of valuable, pure water. It must have looked like the cliff had its own way of making the water, and the cave was a huge output valve that never shut off.

The whole region around the city of Caesarea Philippi is truly an oasis, even down to this day, as it is now known as Baniyas. It was allowed to thrive down through the ages, from one civilization to the next, all thanks to this supply of water. But where did the water come from? Rain and snow were rare for this area, and so the people who inhabited this region began to create and worship various gods. They must be the ones who provided this rich resource for us, so the people believed. The people then etched nooks into the cliff where they would place the idols depicting the various gods who were so generous to them. By the time Jesus and His disciples walked around here at Caesarea Philippi, there were at least a dozen Roman and Greek idols looking down below from their position on the side of the cliff. You could literally take your pick from the gods standing there and worship to your heart's desire.

A "god" (using a small g) can be defined as Martin Luther says in the Large Catechism as something, anything that we rely on to give us good things. The ancient people had idols for their gods; we today have around us just about everything else that would fit that description,

whether it's money, possessions, political power or other false gods. A great majority of Americans *say* they believe in God—or maybe I should say, *a* God—but there are countless opinions as to who that God is. Even faithful, churchgoing believers could have a variety of opinions on who they think Jesus is and why it is important to know Him. Even some Christians may think that we should believe in Jesus Christ just because He helps us make the right decisions in life.

The disciples knew what other people were saying about Jesus. The crowds were being fed by the thousands at the hand of this Man, the sick ones were being miraculously healed. This miracle worker could walk on water, heal somebody just by saying the word, and He taught like nobody these people have ever heard. He must be some great character from the Biblical past like John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. That was what the other people were saying. One thing is for sure: God must have sent this Man to do some very important things among us.

It is easy to believe and say Jesus was an important person. Even the theologians who deny that the Bible is God's true and inspired Word would freely admit that the historical figure of Jesus was truly an outstanding individual. All Muslims give an honored place to Jesus in their system of belief, even though of course they give the highest honors to Mohammed. And even you come here today because you have some idea that what Jesus has to say is worth hearing. But what makes His words different from the words of any other prophet or preacher?

After He asked the disciples "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Jesus didn't react to or reflect on all those different prophets that

they mentioned. In fact, He didn't take the time to say *anything* about them, good or bad. It was clear already that those other options and opinions were not right. Instead, Jesus fires another question, this time it is pointed to them, as it is pointed to you today: "But who do you say that I am?" That is the more important question in this Gospel. What is your confession of faith? Are you going to side with the hungry crowds who see nobody but a miracle worker or someone who can give you a free lunch? Or are you going to speak the truth together with St. Peter and the whole Christian church of all places and all times? For what does the church believe and say? "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Peter got it right this time. Even though he did and said some pretty stupid things at other times, Peter is the one who stepped out boldly and said it on behalf of all the other disciples and even the whole Christian church. But what he said was not his own personal testimony. Jesus clearly told him that flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. These words are what you confess today. They are not part of the world's knowledge, and these words are certainly not what you can find in any and every religious belief. God Himself has taught you to confess this truth: Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of the living God. All nations and peoples can look to only one pure source for their life, and Jesus is the only one who can fulfill their need. All other gods are mere statues like the ones sitting on the cliff over the watery cave in Caesarea Philippi, but the true God is the one who provides the water that you need.

So why is Jesus so particular about His identity? He seems so adamant that He wants these people to know the truth about Him. What difference does it make to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God?

The first reason lies in the difference between Jesus and the other prophets. For they were all part of the Old way of things: Jeremiah, Elijah, even John the Baptist, who lived at the same time as Jesus. They all looked forward to the coming of Christ and His mission to die to save all people. When they preached, they pointed not to themselves but to the Man who was much greater than they. Jesus points to no one but Himself and His Father in heaven who sent Him to earth.

Jesus Himself gives you the second reason why it is important to know that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He says to Peter and really to all His disciples, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Only the one, true and living God possesses such keys. He said in the first Commandment, "You shall have no other gods," and so no other god can open up the door of heaven and give eternal life. Jesus alone has the authority to do that. If He were merely a great man or a prophet whom God sent, His statement about giving the keys of the kingdom would only be picture language or a metaphor of some sort. But since Jesus is the true God in the flesh, He is here giving out the actual keys to heaven to all who are sent out to preach His Word.

The words of Christ are the words of the living God. As it was in the beginning, when at creation He spoke the word and the world came forth out of nothing, so it is now. For when He speaks His Word, a sinner believes and becomes a resident of heaven. Unlike the words that seemingly come from the mouths of the other false gods, the words of Christ have real authority, even over sin and death. These words are able to forgive even your sin and overcome your doubt. The words of Christ that you hear today don't tell you about God; they don't inform you on what eternal life is like. The words of Christ give you God. The words of Christ give you eternal life. Each one of you who have been baptized has received the wonderful gifts that the words of Christ bring.

The keys of the kingdom of heaven have opened heaven to you, because the Son of the living God died on the cross for you and rose from the dead for you.

You are the church, built on the words of Christ. The gates of hell will not prevail against you. You confess along with Peter the foundation upon which you are built, and that foundation is: Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God. You are washed clean and your thirst is quenched from God's life-giving spring. This spring comes not from the side of any mountain or cliff somewhere, it comes from the baptismal font, and from the words of Christ you hear and sing today. Once you have publicly confessed the truth about Jesus, you also along with all the other baptized believers receive Our Lord's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Jesus gives you all these things through His chosen representatives, as the hymn says (LSB 614):
The words which absolution give/ Are His who died that we might live;
The minister whom Christ has sent/ Is but His humble instrument.
When ministers lay on their hands,/ Absolved by Christ the sinner stands;
He who by grace the Word believes/ The purchase of His blood receives.

Receive the gifts of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God! Leave behind your false gods and trust in Him who gives you everything that your body and soul would ever need. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, as Saint Paul puts it in Romans 12, adopting a whole other way to view Jesus and what He comes to do for you. Make your confession of faith along with Peter, because God gives you the words of Christ that you speak and sing today in the church's liturgy. The keys of the kingdom of heaven have opened eternal life to you and you are now free to enter in.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.