

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

In Nomine Jesu

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You heard it here? Has the Christian Church spent centuries doing the wrong thing? Did it miss the message Jesus left his disciples with in our text? **Don't tell anyone that [I am] the Messiah.** Peter already blew it by naming Jesus **the Messiah, the Son of the living God** and got about the biggest compliment Jesus ever gave: **You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.** And moments later ... ? **Don't tell anyone that [I am] the Messiah.** Go figure, right? Guess I ought to preach a sermon to solve the mystery, right?

Today is going to be a bit different. Today's sermon won't just be me or mine. Today we've got multiple preachers' ideas to help us work on this problem. Our text ... today's Holy Gospel ... is Jesus' building plan for the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. And it's all based on a rather bold ... some might call it questionable... premise. It's for sure a text that leaves us scratching our heads. But listen to our guest preachers, OK?

First one? Well, I'll never forget my associate pastor in Deerfield Beach who had a memorable sermon about faith and action. You'll remember it's setting though you couldn't have heard it, because we heard it here last week. It was about Peter stepping out of the boat into stormy water believing he'd get to walk on water to Jesus. It was about how the walk was a short one because Peter's faith was short and he began to sink? And I was sitting there during the whole sermon remembering the joke I reminded you about last week about Peter walking on water not being so miraculous ... the punch line was that he just knew where a few of the rocks were just below the waves on the surface and then ... water world. You've heard that one, right?

Well that gets me to the **second one** for today ... me. And it's about my remembering the joke about Peter knowing where the rocks were ... my persistent need to "downsize

God" to stuff I can manage as a human being. Making God "my size" rather than "God size" so I don't have to stretch too far in my faith life. I once preached a whole sermon on that.

And my temptation is still to not "take God at God's word" because I know myself so well ... how failing and fallible I am ... and maybe that's true of my proclaiming the truth of God in today's text as well. Because it's really quite a claim to believe that Jesus – this Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly – is the Christ, the long awaited Messiah, the Son of God. Peter knew that about Jesus. And we're called to do the same.

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And yet we sometimes make that claim highly questionable by the way we live our lives ... so often saying that we believe Jesus Christ is Lord, but living as if we don't. Sounds like many of us take comfort in the way Jesus ended the text ... about being sure not to tell anybody, at least clearly or convincingly, about who he truly is.

I think that today's text finds Jesus calling us again to move from simply being satisfied with affirming faith with our minds and lips ("talking the talk") to lives that embody the faith in every moment of our lives ("walking the walk"). And Jesus is so bold that he says today again that he forms his church, his answer to what's wrong with the world, upon us, making us into the "rocks" on which he builds a grand edifice that blesses the world in his name. What a wonder!

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And here's a sort of fable sermon idea from somebody I'd never heard of but am deeply grateful I've discovered, our **third** special proclaimer. Brian D. McLaren, in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy* had this "take" on our text in his imaginative way. About God's people throughout the ages he said:

They didn't like waiting for God to come to them, so they built a tower, with its top up in the heavens so they could get to God. They would design a ladder, a ramp, that would get them up to God, that would make them like God.

They didn't like a God who was invisible, that is, not always readily available, so they made gods unto themselves. A golden calf will do. It wasn't much of a God, but it was portable, available. And that's better than a God who comes and goes at his own pleasure.

They didn't like the story about God that was told to them in their scriptures. So they made up stories for themselves, stories about themselves, stories that had a more satisfying and happy ending. They told stories that flattered themselves, that portrayed themselves in the best possible light.

They didn't like trotting around after God in the wilderness, with nothing but a tent, and a tabernacle that had to be set up and taken down every week. So they built themselves a house fitting for the God who was fitting for people like them. A huge temple, with great stones, tall pillars, and a great tower. "Here's where God lives!" they said unto themselves. Here is a God who befits a people like us, a great God for a great people, the center of the nation. Stable, placed, located, secure.

They got a good world, full of good things, but still wild, untamed. So they cut down

trees and they made paths, roadways, walled-in gardens, got a world more to their liking. They improved on what God had given. They engineered, called it development. It made them feel like God. It made them feel better than God.

They tried prayer. But it didn't give them what they wanted, when they wanted it. So they raised an army. They built high walls, and great towers. They moved from wood, to iron, to steel. They put a point on the steel. They made chariots. Now, they didn't have to pray for security. Now they were secure, as secure as if they were God.

They didn't like God coming among them as a Jew. So they uncircumcised him. They made him the highest and best of humanity, a great moral example, the very best of human beings, the universal man.

They didn't like God being born of a woman, the result of woman's labor, and pain. So they made the word made flesh back into a word, a concept, an abstract idea, a generality, a universal principle.

They got tired of Jesus talking in double talk, in parables, riddles, and mysteries. So they came up with four spiritual laws, basic principles, a set of infallible ideas, four fundamentals, something they could memorize, frame and put on a wall. That they can think about and discuss, ponder and consider.

They didn't want their God to be limited to an ancient book, something written by Jews, something from the ancient world, out of date. So they wrote other books, contemporized things, brought it up to date, rescued it from these dead people, these saints. They needed a God who was all-powerful, absolute, and omnipotent, not one who suffers, who submits, and dies, a God who could be tortured to death by them. So they got a God who was higher, more lifted up, absolute, and all-powerful, a God who acted more like a God.

They found drugs to cure their disease, and called them miraculous. They didn't need God to work wonders for them because they made miracles themselves. They got all the nations of the world organized and united, calling that peace.

They couldn't stand not knowing everything, took offense when they found something they couldn't explain, so with prying eyes and probing fingers, they pushed everywhere, stripped off the outer covering, tried to get to the essence, to penetrate to the core, to explain it, figure it out, tell what it really was.

In the middle of a dark forest, they started to cut, they started to clear, and clear out, because why not? They did it, simply because they could do it. Everything was theirs, because they declared it to be so.

Despite all that, God kept coming back. God steadfastly refused to be sculpted into our own image.

Despite our relentless efforts to project our images of God upon God, God projected God's image back upon us.

We said, "We want you to be God, high and lifted up, distant and remote."

Still, he came to us and said, "I am God with you, for you. And upon you I will build my church. Upon you I'll make my kingdom. Through you I'll work to get back the world that has wandered far from me. Upon you."

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And let's hear about it from **our fourth and shortest – as in briefest - preaching reflection**, former Duke University chaplain, William Willimon.

Back at the University, when I was doing a study on student alcohol abuse, interviewing students concerning their drinking habits, I asked one student, "Do you ever engage in binge drinking?"

"No," he responded definitely. "I'd like to, but I don't."

"Why?" I persisted.

"Because I'm a drama major," he replied. "We're always 'on.' We're always 'in rehearsal, practicing, learning new lines.' That's why I don't drink."

Willimon concluded,

I've never heard anyone say, as far as I can recall, "I don't (abuse alcohol, overeat, steal, you fill in your particular vice) because I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God."

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And here's Dr. Willimon's prayer about all of that for ... and I hope from ... all of us:

Lord Jesus, here we are as your church. We know some of the many ways we fail to be your obedient people. Often, when we want to be courageous, we are cowards. Sometimes when we want to be faithful we are unfaithful.

And yet knowing us better than we know ourselves, you elected us, you chose us to be your church and your bodily presence in the world, to reach out to the world in your name.

Give us what we need, dear Lord, to be faithful to your vocation. Forgive us when we disappoint you by the poor quality of our discipleship. Remind us anew of the plans that you have to win a rebellious world back to you through us.

We're here today because of our faith in you. Yet the thing that amazes us this day ... again today ... again every day ... even in our worst days ... is the faith you have in us!

Amen.

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Soli Deo Gloria