

Who Do You Say I Am?
Matthew 16:13-20

Standing at the gates of hell, who do you claim Jesus to be? That's the question we wrestle with today. When facing the inevitable darkness, who do you confess Jesus to be? When the princes and powers of this world loom large, who do you believe Jesus to be? When the threat of temptation, destruction, and death is near, who do you need Jesus to be? That's not only the question but the challenge given to each of us in this gospel reading for today. When life crunches down on you. When pressure and tension builds. When you are left helpless. When you are tempted with promises of self satisfaction at the expense of others. When you are tempted to conveniently forget who Jesus is for a while so you can do what you feel is right, denying the truth of God's word. Standing at the gates of hell, whatever they look like, where do you turn? In all of these moments who do we lean on Jesus to be or not be for us?

Before we go further into your moments of confession or denial, I want to go into detail describing the scene that is before us in Matthew 16. Jesus is walking with his disciples. They are on the far north end of Israel in Caesarea Philippi, which is an area that blurs religions and culture. This interaction between Jesus and Peter happens in a particular spot, an unholy site with great significance. This particular place is described by scholars as "a mountain that is raised to an immense height, and at its side, beneath, or at its bottom, a dark cave opens itself; within which there is a horrible precipice, that descends abruptly to a vast depth: it contains a mighty quantity of water, which is immovable; and when anybody lets down anything to measure the depth of the earth beneath the water, no length of cord is sufficient to reach it." Jesus and his disciples stop in front of the mouth of this deep, dark cave which served as a temple to the greek god Pan. They stop to discuss who Jesus truly is.

Now, this temple that surrounded and included the cave was built by Herod the Great in honor of Caesar Augustus. This shows how blurred the lines were in this region as a ruler in Israel worked to appease the occupying forces. This site was known as a place you do not go. It was known as almost like the "sin city" of their day. It was a known mandate from the rabbis that Jewish people do not go to this place. This temple, this cave represented idol worship, sexual gratification, animal sacrifice and pagan rituals. The Greeks called this place Panias, and the cave was the main attraction for Hellenistic pagan worship. Animal sacrifices were thrown into the bottomless pool inside. If the sacrifices sank, the gods were appeased. It was a free-for-all kind of a place where the true God was denied to seek after the satisfaction of fake gods and the pleasures of sin. To those worshiping there it was known as the gateway to the underworld. To the Jews it was simply known as the gates of hell. This is where Jesus decides to stop and have a conversation about who he is.

Jesus turns to his disciples with the gates of hell looming large behind them and asks a question. "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" I can imagine the disciples kind of fumbling around for an answer. "Well, some people say that you are John the Baptist. Others say you are the return of the great prophets, Elijah or Jeremiah. Many think you are just one in a long line of powerful voices for Yahweh." Jesus takes in their response and digs a little deeper. "Okay, but who do you say that I am?" Of course, Peter is the one to step up and blurt out the answer. It is correct but I'm not sure he understands all that comes with the title he is placing on Jesus. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" I can just imagine Jesus' posture at that moment. He smiles and nods. His face turns serious with a look of determination as he points to the dark presence over their shoulders. "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This confession was going to be the foundation of the Church. We see that come to fruition at Pentecost as Peter preaches a sermon that converts thousands.

In this moment, in these eight verses, we see the challenge that you and I face on a daily basis. Standing in front of the gates of hell, who do you claim Jesus to be? Now, for Peter it was pretty easy. We've heard for the past three weeks all about the miracles leading up to

this moment. Peter knows Jesus is God because of the signs and wonders he has seen with his own eyes. It might not have been that hard in the moment for him to confess Jesus as God. But later on down the road he forgets. When faced with the threat of arrest or punishment Peter denies Jesus three times. During a fireside chat, outside the halls of injustice, while Jesus is being sentenced to death Peter doesn't find it so easy to confess. As he stared into that fire, confronted by voices that could condemn him too, he isn't as bold.

The gates of hell aren't always as obvious as a deep, dark cave dedicated to idol worship and animal sacrifice. We often stand outside the entry to the underworld, teetering on the edge of sin and sainthood. Sometimes they are the challenges of someone who doesn't believe. It shows itself in the form of mockery, like you are so stupid to believe the myth that is Christianity. Sometimes the gates of hell show themselves as sexual temptations. Pornography or sex outside of marriage are confessions as much as they are life choices. Sometimes it is the call of the culture to compromise on what scripture says is the truth. Do we confess the laws and moral standards of the world or stick to the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Other times it is found in the moments when we could desperately choose to deny God's power and plan in the world. Facing death, destruction, chaos or scarcity. We teeter on the edge of the underworld as the voice of Jesus echoes in our heads: Who do you say that I am? Do we lean into Jesus, confessing him as our Lord and Savior or do we run into the temple of Pan, deep into the dark cave of sin and death, because its easier or more satisfying in the moment? Who do you confess Jesus to be? When the tensions rise, when things get tough, when sin is knocking at your door or calling out to you from the depths of hell, who is Jesus to you?

If you read on further you see the great promise from Jesus that follows Peter's bold confession. Picture that scene again, just as you did before. Jesus promises the disciples, and us today, that the Church will never be overtaken by satan so long as it remains firmly on that confession. I named numerous scenarios just a minute ago. You may have thought of some more on your own. These moments where we stand so close to the gates of hell that we can feel the heat radiating out. You will stand victorious in those moments of temptation, those moments that feel so close to defeat, if you boldly confess the name of Jesus. It doesn't matter how strong the pull of that pagan temple. I don't care how longingly you stare into its mysterious depths. Turn and face Jesus. Turn and boldly confess him as Lord, even over your current circumstances, and you will survive. It is on this confession that the Church marches on. It is on this rock solid foundation that the Church will continue on even as it feels close to extinction or defeat. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That truth saves us from the fiery pits of hell.

That truth saves us because it is Jesus Christ who saves us. It isn't the confession alone that delivers us. It is the focus of our trust and hope that earns salvation for us. The Christ that Peter confesses dies on a hill far away. On an old rugged cross, his death covers our sin and denial. As we stand outside that dreadful cave, characterized by death and debauchery, Jesus willingly enters it in his death. His lifeless body is taken off that cross and placed in a tomb, a dark cave, only to rise victoriously over it three days later. As we teeter on the edge of sin and salvation, Jesus willingly plunges himself down into the cavernous depths to push us back to safety in the arms of our savior. This is the Christ we confess. This is the messiah that delivers us from all sin, death, and the power of the devil. This is the Son of the Living God. It's amazing, this temple that Jesus claims victory over, was built in honor of Caesar Augustus. I told you that before but what I didn't tell you is that upon his death, Augustus was declared a god. You and I both know he's still dead and buried. That's what happens to the princes and powers of this world. Only Jesus stands living atop the tombs of the false gods of this world. Only Jesus. Only our savior. Only the Son of the Living God.

So, I don't know what precipice you are standing over right now. I don't know what fiery gates tempt and tease you on a regular basis. First, recognize where you are. Recognize what is calling out to you. What temptations are there for you out there? What are the entrances to the underworld that lure you away from Jesus? Once you name them then you can turn and tell them the name of your savior. You can call on the name of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That can be your bold confession in the face of temptation, sin, and death. It is

your saving grace when you've fallen far from it. It is your escape from the clutches of sin. It is your deliverance from a sinful world. In the most sinful place in the known world, Jesus reveals himself to be God. He can do that for you in your most desperate moments too. Forgiveness and rescue given by the Son of the Living God. Jesus Christ. Your savior and mine. Boldly confess him. Not only to the world but straight to the face of satan himself. The gates of hell will not overtake you. Amen.