

Razing Hell

Matthew 16:13-20

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost; August 23, 2020

“Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego? Anyone remember



those words? *Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego?*” was the title of a popular children’s show on Public Television a generation or so ago.

It gave hints of information and glimpses of super-cool surroundings about a “secret” location where the cartoon character “Carmen Sandiego” was hiding out. The idea, of course, was to teach children about other parts of the country, what other parts of the world looked like, and how people from other cultures lived. A few years later an animated show on Nickelodeon, *Dora the Explorer*, did the same thing for even younger kids. It was geography and cultural history rolled-up into one,



making learning a fun “quiz show” for kids. Matt Lauer, on the *Today Show*, tried something similar for grown-ups. He seemed like a friendly guy at the time.

So “where in the world” are Jesus and his disciples in today’s gospel story? They are definitely not in some kid-friendly place. Jesus had just journeyed about 25 miles away from the region of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi on the northern-most border of Palestine. This was far distant from just skirting the edges of Gentile regions where Jesus conversed with the Canaanite woman we talked about last week. When Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi it was like traipsing into the red-light district of Sodom and Gomorrah. For religiously observant Jews, Caesarea Philippi was definitely not a good place.

Jesus lived in close proximity to three ancient cities. Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, was just over the hill from Nazareth. Tiberias was on the Sea of Galilee. Travelers had to go through Scythopolis to get to Jerusalem. Even though there’s no record of Jesus having visited these cities, it’s almost certain that Joseph, Jesus’ earthly dad, worked in Sepphoris. If so, Jesus would have worked there too.

That Jesus went anywhere near Caesaria Philippi surely raised eyebrows. Despite being identified as part of the Hebrew lands, this region had always been enthusiastically pagan. When Israel’s monarchy

was first established, this area was well-known as a pagan stronghold for Baal worship. As time went on, Greek fertility gods became popular and the area and was re-named Pnias in honor of the goat-like fertility god, Pan. When the Romans swept in, their political hack, Philip the Tetrarch (the son of Herod the Great), renamed the city after the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar and put his own name on the end — thus “Caesarea Philippi.”

Caesarea Philippi sat at the foot of Mount Hermon. At the base of the mountain was a large cave with a natural spring. The spring water ran out from the mouth of the cave, suggesting to the pagan locals that this was a “pipe-line” to somewhere. Water that appeared to be running from some nether region met all the pagan criteria of an entryway into the underworld of Hades. The pagans of Caesarea Philippi believed this



cavern to be literally the “gates of hell.”

According to their beliefs, the fertility gods disappeared down this deathly gateway every autumn. This exit plunged the land into its

infertile, fallow winter. To entice the gods to reappear there were freaky

fertility rites celebrated every spring. An apt description of this bizarre stuff would best be left unsaid.

But even with the unsaid left unsaid, you get the idea. Caesarea Philippi wasn't a hospitable area for a faithful Jew. It was considered the "gates of hell," a place where there was no recognition of the one true God, the creator and sustainer of all living things. While it's doubtful that Jesus even stepped foot into Caesarea Philippi proper, the fact that he was even near the district would be cringe-worthy.

And yet in the shadow of this most unholy of place, Jesus does a most holy thing. He spins around on his heel and asks a pointed, personal question to all of his disciples: "Who do people say that the son



of man is?" To which the disciples respond with answers that seem to "sort of" get the idea that Jesus is in the general prophetic tradition.

But these group answers are still off-kilter. They immediately reply "John the Baptist," which is a head-scratcher because they had physically seen Jesus together with John. Then they suggest "Elijah," a

prophet who was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, and whom John the Baptist was also likened to in his lifetime. Only Matthew's gospel adds the suggestion of "Jeremiah," the prophet who was both a messenger of coming judgment and of divine redemption.

Jesus now narrows his question to a razor-sharp point, "What about you? Who do you say I am?"

And once again Simon takes it upon himself to be the mouthpiece for all the disciples — whether they agree with him or not. He declares, "You're the Messiah, the son of the living God!"

This is the first time one of Jesus' own disciples declare him as "the Messiah" with all that this declaration means for a Jew. Jesus confirms the declaration, but also affirms that Simon himself is not the source of this insight: "Flesh and blood didn't reveal that to you; it was my father in heaven." Regardless of the declaration's source, Simon's words get a special blessing put upon him from Jesus, a blessing that comes as both a pun and a promise.

Jesus blesses Simon and then renames him as "Peter," which in Greek is *Petros*. Jesus then goes on to declare that *Petros* shall be the

petra or the “rock” upon which “I will build my church.” All this conversation happens in proximity of Caesarea Philippi and the infamous “gates of hell.” I guess that’s why Jesus wanted to go here — to pronounce right in front of “the gates of hell” that it won’t overpower” the church that he’s now establishing.

And Jesus’ blessing rolls on: Peter is promised that he shall be given the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” and the pledge that “whatever you tie up on earth will have been tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will have been untied in heaven.”

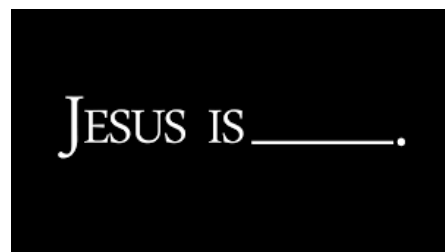
Even today keys symbolize power and authority. Small children don’t often have keys (although we may give them plastic keys to play with). For school-age children who have to let themselves in because the grown-ups are at work, their own key is a big step-up in responsibility. And who doesn’t remember their first car key (or maybe now an electronic “key” for a “keyless” ignition). Keys symbolize a rite of passage.



By appointing Simon Peter the custodian of the “keys to the kingdom,” Jesus is handing over tremendous responsibility to each and

every one of his disciples. Jesus knows the weaknesses and strengths of all of them. Given Peter's track record for thick-headedness and a quick-temper, giving him the "keys to the kingdom" might be likened to how most parents feel when handing over the car keys to a newly-licensed teenager. You know that mysterious dents and scratches will appear and — depending on size of object said teenaged hellion-on-wheels crashes into — it could be pretty costly. But Jesus knew that he had an "assurance" policy called the Holy Spirit getting ready to help mitigate the effects of any foolish behavior.

The gift of the "keys" of the kingdom of heaven is (to use *Spiderman* terms) a tremendous responsibility for all of Jesus' disciples. It conveys a divine mission to create and recreate, to produce and



reproduce a community of disciples who will confess Jesus as "Messiah" and "Lord," "Son of God" and "Son of Man."

It's this kingdom community that will embed, embody, and embolden Jesus' message and extend his mission throughout the world — even to the world that lives at the "gates of

hell.” Have we ever really noticed that the first thing Jesus does when establishing his church is to send the church to hell? Life without discomfort, struggle, and paradox doesn’t seem to be the Lord's concern, though I often wish it were.

It’s to saints and sinners that Jesus entrusts the “keys to the kingdom.”

It’s to saints and sinners that Jesus gives the promise to stand by them when those who have “gone to hell” proclaim the good news in the worst of places.

It’s to saints and sinners that Jesus offers assurance that never will the “gates of hell” prevail against them.

It’s to saints and sinners that Jesus gives the power to raze hell with the raising power of his cross over evil and death.

In a world where people brag about being hell-raisers, Jesus instead sends out his disciples as hell-busters, or hell-razers (spelled with a “z”).

Our story this week, Bible scholars tell us, is the most researched, picked-apart, and argued passage in scripture. This, of course, has

everything to do with the debate between Catholics and Protestants about exactly how “large-and-in-charge” Peter was as an individual. But what this scripture’s #1 status reveals in itself is revealing.

It reveals that we (the church) are often more interested in who we are than in who Jesus is. Ecclesiology (theology about the church) must follow Christology (theology about Christ), and not the other way around. We must get right, as Peter eventually did, who Jesus as the world’s Messiah is before we can get anything else right.

It also reveals that we (the church) are often far more focused on what authority we may or may not wield, and far less focused on what those “keys” are meant to unlock. The “keys” are not about claiming and clutching our “authority.” The “keys” are about unlocking discipleship, about revealing Jesus, and showing Jesus to the world. The keys aren’t about Christians seeing themselves as in charge over everybody else. The keys are about “the One who’s in charge.” Hint: it’s Jesus. (Okay, that’s more than a hint. It’s a declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God.)

Jesus knew that we, the church, his church, will get it wrong as least as often as we get it right. Yet hear Jesus' promise to all "hell-razers" who are keepers of the keys this morning. Hear these words as the closing words echoing in your ear before you go from here to "Home Sweet Home" or "Home Sweet Hell" or wherever — before we go to whatever "gates of hell" in our own day that we're called to follow Jesus into — be it prisons and hovels and pits. Use your God-given keys. The world is your keyhole: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell won't overpower it."



Words of assurance from Jesus — You have keys to the kingdom, now go and raze hell.

Amen.