

# "I Will Build My Church"

Matthew 16:13-20

August 21, 2005

It is unclear why Matthew tells us the location in which today's Gospel took place but he does - and I am glad he did. Caesarea Philippi was a town located at the head waters of the Jordan river. I had the opportunity to be in Israel some years ago and our guide pointed out the exact spot where they believe that Jesus asked his disciples this question about what people were saying concerning who He was. It seemed like a really surreal experience as I think back on it. There we were in that ancient spot with a guide who spoke fair English but was always checking with our group to see if we were understanding. There we were at the head waters of the Jordan River listening to a man speaking in broken English wearing a sweatshirt with the name "Alabama" written boldly across it {he was a fan of the music group}. It was a beautiful spot - lush trees hanging out over the sparkling clean waters that flowed down to form the Jordan river. As we looked at this pool that marked the beginning of the Jordan, there was a rocky hill in front of us and to the right that the guide pointed out. Especially, he noted a niche that had been carved into the rock and he explained that this was what remained of an ancient temple that would have been in it's glory at the time of Christ. In the niche would have stood a statue of the goat-footed god Pan of ancient mythology. I did not catch all of what he was saying but he said something about either the altar or the temple that had once stood there or perhaps even that niche itself having once been called the Gates of Hell. When he had finished his little talk the guide invited us to wander around the area - but warned us not to disturb anything up on top of the hill nearby because the Druids (another ancient religion) continued to use the sight for their worship. And sure enough, up on the hill we found the remains of a recent animal sacrifice. It was kind of a spooky place. \*\*\* The other disturbing image I remember from that place was all of the Israeli soldiers that were wondering around the area - young kids really, wearing soldier uniforms and carrying automatic weapons. And there amid all of that strange, wild stuff we were reminded that Peter steps forward to answer a simple question from Jesus - - - Who do you say that I am? - - - "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

There, nearly 2000 years ago, amid strange ancient religions and beliefs, Jesus looked at the rocks surrounding them in that quiet place near Caesarea Philippi with its shrine to Pan and the gates of hell - and He heard that beautiful statement of faith expressed by Peter - and Jesus said to him - "*.... on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will never prevail against it.*" Jesus is the Christ - the Savior - the Son of the Living God - the one solid foundation on which to build. And God began to build His church. Since then the worship of Pan has become nothing more than ancient mythology - and the Druids little more than a tiny radical sect that tries to cling to ancient beliefs - I am sure that Israel's soldiers continue to be

very present in that area [especially with the current withdrawal of Israel from Gaza] --- but the church of Christ has become a dominate force around the world. It has spread to every corner of the world and more that 1/4 of the world's population claims a faith in Jesus. From time to time storms rage around the church and people groan as they wonder what is going to happen to the church. There have been struggles over theology and differing interpretations of scripture - there have been attacks on the faith - there is the ongoing battle to keep the church out of the states affairs and even within the ELCA we face and have faced countless issues that have threatened to destroy the church. Many times, even in recent years there have been those who believed that the church would crumble because of what was going on around us. But not even the gates of hell could destroy what God began.

Not even death itself could overcome Jesus - and now it holds no power over the people of God. What can possibly destroy the people of God who stand on the Rock. What can possibly destroy that which is built on Jesus the Christ - the Son of the living God?

I am not exactly sure why it is, but this thought gives me a great deal of comfort in these days that seem to be so filled with uncertainty. It seems as though we have lost so much solid ground - I often feel as though I can hardly be surprised by any new change in our world. But, for all of it's struggles to be faithful, the church of Christ stands on that one solid foundation and the gates of hell can do nothing to destroy it.

What then do we do with this simple fact. What do we do with the fact that everywhere around us all of the changes and uncertainty makes it feel as though our world is made up totally of shifting desert sand. What do we do with the fact that God invites us to build our lives on the solid rock?

If you want to enjoy the stability of being built on the Rock, our scriptures today gives us some serious guidance. And I will just note three things:

1. Paul tells the church folk in Rome - give yourself totally to this building that God is doing. It is a difficult call - especially in a world that allows us to get by with little real commitment. Paul says simply - you have a choice - either you will allow your life to be 'confirmed' to the way of the world - or - you will be 'transformed' by the power of God.

2. God has blessed you with gifts that He wants to use in the church. Use them. Celebrate them. Paul say, "Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think." Don't get a big head because you are good at something. But then he was writing to Romans [Italians] - if he had written to Norwegians he would have said, "Don't 'ust sit there thinking that you have nothing to offer - you have a gift - find it - use it!"

3. Finally, Jesus says, "I am building something great. This church will stand against all of the dangers and changes of the world. I want you to be a part. Here

**are the keys! Forgive. I know that there are several sermons hiding in this image of the keys of the kingdom which Jesus gives to Peter and to all who take a stand on that confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ - but for now I must stop with that simple gift - Jesus holds them out to us - here are the keys for you.**

**AMEN**