

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year A August 24, 2014

Theme: You are the Rock

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Had the Gospel today begun "*Jesus went into the region of the Grand Canyon and asked his disciples,*" we no doubt would have asked, "Wonder why he went there?"

But since he "*went into the region of Caesarea Philippi*" and we have no idea where or what that is, we gloss right over that detail and get on to the rest of the story.

At least I always have, and I have actually been to Caesarea Philippi!

Until this week I never put the place and Jesus going there together with the rest of the story.

Caesarea Philippi is a place you have to decide to go to if you live in Galilee: it is 25 miles way north of the Lake in the foothills of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in the region, and in Jesus' day there was no bus.

He deliberately made his disciples hike up there with him.

But like the Grand Canyon, Caesarea Philippi was well worth the trip.

A natural sheer rock cliff over one hundred feet high and five hundred feet long.

And at the base of the cliff is a bubbling natural spring flowing from underground which forms part of the headwaters of the famous Jordan River.

In the first century, built into the massive rock cliff-face was a temple to the mythological god Pan, the patron of nature in all its beauty and glory.

Also carved into the cliff were a multitude of other golden shrines to gods and goddesses and patron, saints and ancestors: no doubt, when seen from a distance, in shimmering sunlight, a glorious and stunning sight.

Thus, says the Gospel, Jesus brought his disciples **“the region of Caesarea Philippi”**, and perhaps on a scenic overlook where they could take in the massive rocky cliff studded with its all its temples and votive offerings he asked them:

“Who do you say that I am?”

How appropriate given where they were standing for the one whose nickname in Aramaic, Greek, Latin and English all means “Rocky” spoke up for the whole group of disciples: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”**

And Jesus, with the Caesarea Philippi monolith in the background responded responded: **“You are Rock and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

Jesus seems to have deliberately taken his disciples all the way up to Caesarea Philippi to as ask his question with that tremendous rock of other gods staring them in the face.

His declaration, however, made clear that they and their faith – not some feature of nature, despite its awesome beauty – would be the rock on which his church, his community of believers would be founded, and founded to last forever.

Unlike the all the gods and religions represented on that huge stone cliff before them, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, would build his community of living stones and that community would never fall despite all the powers of hell.

The faith of Peter – old Rocky - and of the other disciples who believed in him as the Christ of God, the living God, was **the rock solid living** faith which would be the foundation of the church Christ was building.

And sisters and brothers, here we are, believers **still laying new courses** of living rock on that same foundation of faith that was Peter – Rocky – and James and John and Andrew and all the others.

Jesus has through the centuries built up his church on the **rock solid faith of men and women like us** who have confessed our belief that he is the **“Christ, the Son of the Living God.”**

And let’s be clear: we are not talking here primarily about Popes and bishops and priests and religious.

We mean all the **men and women living out the Christian Gospel in the midst of the world:** the husbands and wives, the widows and widowers, the children and students, the millworkers and business people, the teachers and the professionals.

Everyone who is trying to live the values of Jesus – **compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice, kindness, hospitality** – in a society and culture that does not always value these, we are the living rocks on whom Christ is still building his church today –

--- and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

You are Rocky, sisters and brothers; we are Rocky.

We are that **magnificent living structure** with old Peter, the original Rocky, and the crew down there at the foundation forming the temple of God’s glory alive in this world.

Not dead rocks of stone, but living, breathing rocks who form the **church of Jesus, the Christ, the son of the Living God.**