



“ROCKING THE WORLD”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 51: 1-6; MATTHEW 16: 13-20
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
August 27, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 51:1-6

51:1 Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.

51:2 Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.

51:3 For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

51:4 Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.

51:5 I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope.

51:6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Matthew 16:13-20

16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

16:14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

16:15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

16:17 And 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.

16:18 And 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.

16:19 I 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."

16:20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

Do you have a rock? Is it a person? An idea? A practice? What keeps you steady, what grounds you, what is the thing you can count on to be there?

Think about it for a minute—your rock.

I have lots of people who love me in my life—solid people who I trust and love. And I have a lot of other things that frame my life, that ground me in tumultuous times: animals, the night sounds, writing, riding, yoga, running, breathing.

But if you really want to know who my rock, it's Jesus.

He's never let me down—and more than that, he's been with me through some hard times—he knew the truth when I was afraid to tell people the truth as a teenager who was being assaulted and stalked; Jesus abided with me in two difficult pregnancies when I could do nothing but lie in bed and be still because of constant nausea; Jesus was a companion with me in move after move after move in my adult life when I had to start over and felt lonely and grieved. He's been with me as I sit vigil with dying ones and attend to the emergence of new life with birthing ones.

He's been with me when I have been called into leadership for our denomination in contentious situations like conflicts over sexuality, race, and destructive people. He's been with me when John and I advocated for collegiate athletes against a billion dollar business who did not want to hear it.

Jesus is there when my heartbreaks and when my heart sings. Because of Jesus I have never understood myself as being alone—even though I have been through some lonely times. And I've never made a decision when Jesus didn't orient me to what really matters the most.

Including the decision to say yes to your call to serve this church as your pastor and head of staff. I came here because of my rock—because it was clear to me that following him meant saying yes to you. A year ago today we celebrated my installation to this position—and the Stated Clerk of our denomination, J Herbert

Nelson, proclaimed the good news that Jesus isn't afraid of trouble—and the church is called not to be afraid of trouble.

I didn't come to Grace Covenant because it sounded like a nice place to get away from the world. I came here because Jesus called me to be your teacher, your pastor, your preacher, your support as we together follow Jesus in the thick of the world.

Ironically one of the hardest places to spot Jesus can sometimes be the church. Jesus can get crowded out and shouted down by toxic people or fear or church politics or nationalism or revisionist history.

The church can make idols of things that obscure our ability to see Jesus—buildings, programs, people, traditions—anything finite that matters to us can become an idol when we make it everything, when we believe we can't live without it.

Churches can try to quiet Jesus when it seems like what he is asking us to do is too much, too risky, too difficult.

One of the reasons Jesus is my rock, and maybe yours, too, is that none of that stuff stops him.

As I look back on my first year, I give thanks for how Jesus shows up in our midst everyday—in merciful and mysterious ways, in comforting and challenging ways. As I look back over my first year I see how Jesus is at work—cultivating truth, healing, freedom from the bondage of anything that stands in our way of following him.

We all made promises to each other a year ago today. I don't break my promises. And I don't take you for people who break yours either.

But there is one in your number who has broken his promises to me and to my family and to you. There is one in your number who has made it his mission to demean and to degrade God's call—the call that all of us said yes to just a year ago. And today is the day we change our relationship to that destruction. We bring it out into the light, we take it out of the shadows. I see what he is doing. The Session sees what he is doing. Many of you see what he is doing. I am praying, the Session is praying, and I hope you will pray for these harmful, hurtful, destructive ways to stop. Jesus has bigger plans for us, I have no doubt about that.

So today feels like a good day for us to all remember who our rock is and to explore again what that rock means for us as the Body of Christ in the world. Jesus is my rock. Jesus is my redeemer.

Jesus is the one who teaches us again and again that God is always at work offering healing opportunities in the most difficult times. I trust Jesus—he is my rock.

You know this Jesus—this unfailing source of love, this unflinching protector of truth, this undying force of redemption. Jesus is our redeemer.

Jesus is our rock.

Jesus called out Simon—his follower, his friend. He told him he had a unique role to play in this new thing God was doing.

Peter was not a name in Greek or Aramaic—the Aramaic word, Kepha, means rock, stone. The Greek is Petra/Petros.

Jesus gives Simon a nickname—the Rock. (Kinda like Dwayne Johnson—the Rock, the professional wrestler turned actor, the guy in the Bay Watch movie and the voice of the god Maui in Moana—I think he is contemplating a run for president and I think an internet hoax has been circulating that he died.)

Jesus says, “Rock, you are the rock.” The Greek Petros stuck and became Peter. Jesus tells Rock the things he can do—he’s got keys to the kingdom, he’s got the ability to bind and loose (a Rabbinic capacity), and that even death will not prevail against the church built on the rock.

So Petros/Kepha is pretty important to this whole enterprise we call church. Now the interesting thing is what happens with Rock/Kepha/Petros—just a few verses later in Matthew Jesus says to Rock “get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block.” Because that rock began to crack—when it came to the rough parts of following Jesus, Petros was not sure he was all in.

You see Jesus was turning toward Jerusalem—and he was talking to his friends about suffering and death, about the powers and principalities coming down hard—like a ton of bricks. He was talking about public ridicule, violence, being stripped of dignity, being rejected. And the rock said—oh no, not you, Jesus! And implicit in that denial is “oh no, not me, Jesus, you can’t be asking me to do that.”

And later, when the moment of truth was upon him, when Jesus’ life hung in the balance, Rock, Kepha, Petros denies Jesus when Jesus’ friends were scattering faster than teenagers when there are chores to do.

This is the Rock? This is the Rock on which the church is built—a fair-weather friend, an opportunist, maybe even a coward?

What made him the rock—it wasn’t perfection, physique or even perseverance. It was the way God used him to proclaim who Jesus really is—you are the Messiah.

Petros/Kepha rocked the world because he knew he needed saving, and he knew Jesus was the one with the power to do it.

Jesus built the church on a flawed human being. And he launched this new reality in a city that was layered with the power struggles and power abuses of generations.

Caesarea Philippi was a chess piece in the battle over who got to define the history of people and places and things.

Shrines to Pan, a nature deity, monuments to emperors—from Herod the Great to Nero, claims of miracles that propped up religious authority, tales of Jewish martyrs that laid claim to sacred space.

This was a city that human beings had used to tell their stories, flex their muscles, and crush their opponents. They had erected monuments of marble, statues of stone, rock solid buildings to try and make their story stick. But those stories never did stick—buildings can be torn down, statues toppled, names of cities and roadways changed. History is told by those with the power to be heard and believed—but even history can wash away.

And it is here that Jesus says, “I am doing something new—and it is going to be built on you, my flawed friend. God has given you truth that you can see—so you are Rock—a flawed truth seer and truth teller.”

The church is built on a confession, a profession—a man who, in the midst of his flaws, recognized Jesus and had the courage to say you are the Messiah—save me from myself. The rock is just like us—desperately in need of Jesus to save us, and made to see by the grace of God—and it is the Rock’s confession out of imperfection that tells us again who Jesus truly is.

Jesus can take our brokenness and birth a new community—a new way of being together, a new way of being in the word, a new way being at home with ourselves.

From Seattle to San Diego, from the Bronx to Orlando, from Kansas City to Madison to Lexington KY and Austin TX to Birmingham and New Orleans—the artifacts of the confederacy are coming down—even here in Asheville there are conversations about how we remember, honor, and tell the stories of Asheville’s complicated past.

I imagine there are mixed feelings about these monuments and what should happen to them in this sanctuary today—it is not an uncomplicated question. What does it mean to remove these monuments? What does it mean to leave them standing? What history is this community willing to hear?

Let's consider another scenario—another situation where artifacts of the past were discarded, even destroyed. Yesterday eighteen people from GCPC went on the Hood Huggers tour in Asheville with artist, poet, and community visionary, Dwayne Barton. These tours take you into Asheville's historically African-American neighborhoods and share the stories not often heard in Asheville about what it has been like to be a person of color in this city.

Yesterday as we stood out in the parking lot where the Stephens Lee High School used to stand, Dwayne told us about the day the school was torn down—no warning to the neighborhood, to the people to whom that school mattered. People rushed down to try and salvage a brick to remember this focal point of the black community in Asheville. All the school's trophies and plaques were thrown away—a custodian was able to secretly salvage a very few, but the rest were lost forever.

Like Caesarea Phillipi, we are standing on layers of history—on the ruins of oppression and on the victories of a few. And that's where Jesus chooses to build his church—on the ruins of a world that just can't seem to get the message—history doesn't require a victor to be truthful, it requires a savior—and that Savior is most clearly visible in the lives of Jesus' flawed friends finding a way to regard each other, all others, as beloved.

When the monuments of human pride and power are toppling all around us Jesus is the one who saves us from ourselves.

In such a place, with such a people, Jesus says, Rock, you are the rock on which I build my church. That means you and me, we are all called to be rocks, to rock the world in the midst of our foolish and fiendish and feebleminded ways. We are called to steady and to ground, to welcome and to trust, to loose and to bind.

Jesus is the rock in a weary land. And we are his Body—called to rock the world, to be the rock in a world where the ground is shifting to make room for something new.

Rock on, Jesus people. Rock on.

Thanks be to God.