

TO THE GATES OF HELL

Matthew 16:13-20

“On this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will never prevail against it.” This can give us great comfort in this time of uncertainty. Jesus is promising that He will protect His people. Two weeks ago we heard the story of Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm to rescue the disciples. He didn’t spare us from the storm on the 10th, but He did spare us from being hurt. The place in which you are seated in the church building is called the “nave.” That word comes from the same root as the word for “navy,” which means “ship.” The church is seen as a ship in which God protects us from threatening seas around us. Martin Luther said about the Church, “in this Christian Church God the Holy Spirit daily and richly forgives the sins of me and all believers.” The Church is a place of refuge.

This, then, seems to be a good time to hunker down and protect ourselves. Social distancing, saving our money, protecting our families, and playing it safe seem to be very prudent in our world today.

But if that is what we think Jesus is emphasizing in the story where Peter proclaims Him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, then we’ve got it all wrong.

The story cannot be properly understood unless we look at it in context. Jesus has spent much of His ministry in Galilee, the area where He grew up, teaching, healing,

and even feeding both the 5,000 and 4,000. But when people try to make something special about Him, He draws away from them. He is so secretive about His own identity. He is “playing it safe,” not to protect Himself, but to prevent them from making Him an earthly ruler and keeping Him from His journey to the cross. We will hear Jesus say next week that though He is the Son of God, it is His mission to die on the cross. Now finally Jesus allows Himself to be revealed as He first asks the disciples who people say He is, and then asks them who they think He is. Peter confidently answers, “You are the Christ (Messiah), the son of the living God.” Jesus follows this up by saying, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will never prevail against it.”

It is great that our Old Testament lesson is from Isaiah. This helps explain what Jesus means by “rock.” God tells Isaiah, “Look to the rock on which you were built, look to Abraham your father.” Abraham was the first of the people of God. He called Abraham and then his son Isaac and grandson Jacob to be the father of His people. They were called “Israel,” because that is the name God gave to Jacob. Just as Abraham was the first of those people, now Peter is being called the first of God’s people, the Church. Only Peter is not their physical father as Abraham was, but just the first of those who proclaim Jesus to be the

Messiah, the Son of God. So Jesus is not building His Church on Peter the person, but on Peter's confession of faith. Therefore the "rock" of the Church is no one less than Jesus Himself.

So then it is easy to picture the Church as a castle built on a hill, what they call an "impregnable" fortress. We stay safe here while surrounded by a raging world.

But then why does Jesus say, "The gates of hell will never prevail against it"? If He said, "the battering rams or the siege towers or the hordes of hell will never prevail against it; that might make a lot more sense. We can picture the siege of Helms Deep or Minas Tirith in "The Lord of the Rings" movies, where the heroes defend those fortresses from overwhelming odds. Jesus says the "gates" will not prevail. Gates are used to keep the enemy out, used by the defenders, not the attacking forces. If Jesus says, "the gates of hell will not prevail, He is saying the Church is not defending, but on the attack. This is not a "prevent defense" in football, but the long bomb.

What brings sense to this is how Matthew explains that Jesus has taken His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. That may not mean much to us, but Caesarea Philippi was as far north as you could get in Palestine, the farthest place away from Jerusalem. You might expect Jesus to have Himself first proclaimed the Messiah in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith. When candidates first announce their desire to run they often pick a certain place to do it, often in their home area surrounded by

friends. But Jesus does this in Caesarea Philippi. Not only is this physically far away from Jerusalem, but even more spiritually. This is the place of the "gates of hell."

In the Old Testament the people of Israel continually got into trouble by following pagans into worshipping their gods. The most pervasive of this was Baal. When the northern tribes of Israel broke the kingdom of David after Solomon's death, their king set up worship to God in Bethel and Dan. Dan is near to Caesarea Philippi. Soon the Dan site became a center of worship to Baal, not God. Baal was the god of thunder. You need thunder for rain, so Baal was seen as the source of rain, which was the key to raising a good crop in dry Palestine. But often Baal was sleeping, like when in 1 Kings the prophet Elijah has a showdown against the priests of Baal. Baal would come out of his underground sleeping point in a cave at the bottom of a cliff. From these cliffs came water that started the Jordan River, which makes the Sea of Galilee and the only fresh water river in Palestine that does not dry out in the summer heat. This cave is known today as "the gates of hell."

Even more by Jesus' time pagan Greeks had turned this over to a place of worship to the god Pan. Pan was the god of partying. Pan is the original faun, like the one so graphically depicted by the great ballet dancer Nijinsky in Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun." Pan would make "Animal House" look tame. The pagans also placed statues of Pan and other gods in nooks cut into the cliff

side. This was the most pagan of places. This to the Jews was the most evil place on earth. The disciples had to be really uncomfortable being there.

Yet it is here that Jesus openly has His identity proclaimed. Then He for the first time says that His mission is to go to the cross. Why do that in Caesarea Philippi? Jesus is showing that His mission and the mission of the Church is not defensive. It is not about holding to what we have, but about bringing the Gospel even to the most evil place on earth. Jesus has come not just to save Israel, but all of humanity, even the most pagan. And He would not do it by “playing it safe,” but by dying on the cross.

Jesus sends us also into the “gates of hell.” Our lives are not about “playing it safe,” but about sharing our faith with others. This doesn’t mean, for instance, that we go around without face masks. It means that we wear them and practice social distancing not so much to protect ourselves, but to protect others. This does not mean we foolishly spend our wealth and put our family in poverty, but that our wealth is not about enjoying life, but about how we can be “Christ” to other people. This does not mean that we ignore the homework we have to do, but that we don’t use it as an excuse to help other people. Our lives are not about getting a decent degree and job experience

to get a high paying job. Our lives are about being the Church, the Church that Jesus sends even to the “gates of hell.”

We may wonder, “How can little me do that?” Jesus doesn’t say “You (individually), do this.” He is talking about the Church—the fellowship of believers. It is group effort. It is not each individual who steps up to the pulpit or goes on missionary trips or serves overseas, or knocks on doors, or leads a Bible class. Going against the “gates of hell” includes making meals, cleaning up, watching children, teaching our children about Jesus, supporting missionaries and Christian lobbyists, and above all praying. This all happens because Jesus on the cross went into the gates of hell to take away our sin. That same Jesus builds us on His Church, which He brings even into the “gates of hell.” Even you as a person bound at home or new to college or busy with young children can be a part of that.

“The gates of hell will not prevail against it.” That is Jesus’ promise to you and me. He brings God’s Kingdom even into the most evil places, even into the depths of our hearts. So we go with Him as His love spreads into the hearts of others.

MTH