

Sunday, August 21, 2011  
Lectionary 21  
Proper 16  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 51:1–6  
Psalm 138  
Romans 12:1–8  
Matthew 16:13–20  
Year A

I.N.I.

Solid Peter. His name change from Simon to Peter was a strong move by Jesus, giving him the name Rocky for his crystalline, solid, confession that Jesus was the anointed one sent by the living God.

In Caesarea Philippi, a place named for a great and auspicious ruler, the erstwhile rabbi Jesus gets the word from his closest compatriots that his reputation resembles the bold mouthpiece for reform trumpeting in the desert, John, or the worthy opponent to Ahab and Jezebel named Elijah, or the critic of the comfortable rich Jeremiah.

Jesus presses his followers for a mirror to his activity and identity. And out it comes from Peter, the one who previously sank like a stone when Jesus came to him on the water—*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*. In that instant there was a name change--**for Jesus**. The words from the mouth of Simon soon to be Peter were good to enough to hang your hat on, if you could hang your hat on words.

Do you know what the poet Anne Sexton, wrote about words?

*Be careful of words,  
even the miraculous ones.  
For the miraculous we do our best,  
sometimes they swarm like insects  
and leave not a sting but a kiss.  
They can be as good as fingers.  
They can be as trusty as the rock  
you stick your bottom on.  
-Anne Sexton, from *The Awful Rowing toward God**

One of the fondest memories of my childhood in Connecticut was venturing out in the sparse woods around the neighborhood. Climbing up past the Haigs' house where there was a sledding hill, stopping for some beech bark to chew on, making my way deeper in near the abandoned shack, there was the bread loaf. Two rock formations with just enough of a gap in between to make for a leap of faith jump from one to the other. The two rocks resembled a loaf of bread,

sliced in half. And there in the quiet of a boyhood daydream, that bread loaf was a trusty hunk of boulder to stick my bottom on.

Solid rock, giving solace and tranquility to a boyhood afternoon. And then in the distance, my mother would interrupt my communion by ringing the dinner bell.

Peter's confession that pegged Jesus for the Messiah was an aha! moment in the Gospel. Peter, perhaps hearing from Jesus all that countercultural kingdom talk, seeing genuine compassion for the sick, Peter and the rest of the twelve invited to help provide for the hungry, was given insight in that moment pressed for words. The rock of his confession was linked to the strength of the church for making community, from the rabbi-Messiah-who opened heaven's doors. But like my daydreaming being interrupted by the dinner bell, the end of this Gospel story has Jesus shushing the disciples not to tell.

Do you remember Anne Sexton's poem about words as trusty as the rock you stick your bottom on? She concludes, in ways that combine waxing, well, poetic, and alerting caution in this way. About words, she says further:

*But they can be both daisies and bruises.  
Yet I am in love with words.  
They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.  
They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
and the sun, its passionate face.  
Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.  
But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.*

How do you sustain a Christian faith so that it is solid rock, rather than fragile egg? How do you articulate a Christian faith so that it soars like an eagle, rather than flaps like a wren? This is the problem for Peter, post-confession at Caesarea Philippi. This is a problem for many here in 2011, to claim allegiance to a religion, to a movement, to a community that is checkered with bigotry and hypocrisy. For church folk, Sundays have been reportedly been the most segregated day of the week. With doctrinal battles over the Trinity, the sacraments, and authority, no wonder Christianity has such a questionable reputation.

No wonder Jesus shushed the disciples at the end of the story today. Because, at the end of the

Gospel, we will find this incredibly gifted teacher and healer executed as a heretic at best, and as a subversive at worst.

And, at the end of the day, for we who call ourselves Christian, Jesus' story, and his deadly crucifixion and surprising resurrection become the core, the bedrock of how we come to know God.

So wonderful and fragile the Christian journey is.

So strong the Christian community is as it is also vulnerable, flawed, and full of people like you, and like me.

Paul, St. Paul described the community of Christ in words that still ring, not as rock, but as body. Not just any body, but the very body, enfleshment of Christ. In his metaphor for the church Paul singles out gifts, such as exhortation ("Go, Bethesda, Have a great Ice Cream Social") and generosity ("I just got paid. Well I have to set aside something right away for the work of the church"), and diligence, and cheerfulness.

He says something to the effect that our individual gifts contribute to the strength of the whole. That makes sense, that any one person cannot carry the load of responsibility or keep the energy for faith constant.

But the tricky part, the risky part, the leap of faith part, is that in this community we resemble Christ. In our being, and in our doing, we are a door to the divine. We are an icon for the holy, us, here in our Sunday best, and on the days in between.

As we articulate in our very best attempt at language, putting into words what it is that describes our faith in God, it is caught up with this renegade rabbi from the first century who related to fisherman like Peter, to that Canaanite woman who spoke about dogs eating crumbs, Jesus the Christ who spoke words that kissed and stung, and who lived and died.

It is a wonder, as we cast our lot with this Jesus. But we do have stories to tell, like about George Bowers, a fair-haired middle-aged, paunchy man. He was a businessman, a father, someone who let youth like me and others from my church swim in his pool which was next door to the church. But I saw something more in George, a path to belonging. George welcomed me, in my teen years, to sit next to him in the adult choir. And there was this gift of cheerfulness that I looked forward to at each rehearsal, that made me feel alive and connected to something bigger and better than me alone, that seemed true and beautiful, though I learned that the tenor section was also the fun section. George was a golden-throated tenor, who sang of Christ's love, and who demonstrated that by being a genuine adult friend to me, a teenager trying to make it through. I know that George was not perfect. But this flesh and blood part of the body of Christ at Somerset Hills Lutheran Church was trusty enough to stick my vocal chords with, and to remember as an icon for the holy.

In stories like this, in the regular activity of the hodgepodge crew here at Bethesda sharing bread and wine like it matters, in aha! moments and simple conversation with someone here for the

first time, it's like Jesus saying to the rock *Peter, you've got the keys to heaven. Open them up, and invite people in.* Thanks, George. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Peter. Praise God, in Christ, and in Bethesda.

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