

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Commemoration of the Confession of St. Peter  
January 18, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Matthew 16:13-19

<sup>13</sup> *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*

<sup>14</sup> *They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

<sup>15</sup> *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

<sup>16</sup> *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

<sup>17</sup> *Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* (NIV)

Dear brothers and sisters of our Lord,

Rod was tired, so he went to bed, leaving Pat to decide.

It was July of 1976, and Rod and Pat Lambert, the founding members of our congregation, were trying to decide on a name for the church that was about to hold its first service. They had narrowed down the choices to six: Amazing Grace, God Is Love, Beautiful Savior, St. Peter, Lamb of God and Crown of Life. "St. Peter" had been suggested by Pastor Hugo Warnke, who had come to Modesto to assist the Lamberts in getting the new church off the ground. But the Lamberts couldn't decide which of the six names to choose. After much deliberation, Rod went to bed, leaving Pat to decide the name of the new church.

Pat just couldn't decide which name to choose, so she came up with a plan. She numbered the choices 1-6. Then she got out some dice. She rolled a die, and number 4 came up—the number matching St. Peter on the list. And so, 26 years later, we come each Sunday not to Amazing Grace or Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, but to St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church.

I'm not ready to say that the choice of St. Peter as a name for our church was divinely directed, though many times in the Bible God made a choice known through the casting of lots, sort of an ancient form of rolling dice. But I am ready to say that St. Peter is a good name for a church. It's a good name not so much because of Peter, the friend and apostle of Jesus, but because of God, who blessed Peter. Today, on the day that Christians have set aside to remember Peter and the confession of faith he made, let's reflect on that—how God blessed this ordinary man and how...

**Just Like Peter, We Are Blessed**

### **Because God has revealed his Son to us**

Are you familiar with the part of Scripture we are looking at today? You may be; it was just a few months ago that we heard a sermon on this section. The Lord is saying a lot to us in these verses, though, so let's think about them again.

Jesus... asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

At this point, Jesus could have listened to all the opinions about him and then said, "Hmm. Well, that's interesting. But he didn't. That's because he wasn't merely curious about public opinion, he was genuinely interested in these men who were following him. He wanted to know where their hearts were. That's why he said, "But what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?"

This is the love of Jesus in action. He could have brushed off these ordinary, sinful men. But he didn't.

Remember when Peter first met Jesus? It was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the large lake where Peter—he was then known as Simon—worked as a fisherman. (See Luke 5:1-11.) One day Jesus commandeered one of Peter's fishing boats. He sat in it just offshore while a crowd stood on the beach listening to him. Then, when the lesson was over, Jesus told Peter to go out fishing again. An odd request; you didn't fish in the deep water in the middle of the day when the sunlight drove the fish down from the surface. But Simon Peter listened to this intriguing man and did what he said. He came back with so many fish that he could scarcely handle them. When Simon Peter got back to the pier and found Jesus, he didn't say thanks, he said "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Simon Peter realized that he was in the presence of the divine.

When Simon Peter said, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man," Jesus could have. But he didn't. He stayed and called Simon to follow him. Through Jesus' words and actions, God the Father revealed to Simon Peter who this Jesus was. He was the only Son of God, on earth in the flesh to reclaim people for the life God intended for them. That's why Peter was able to confess what he and the other disciples knew and believed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Look at Jesus' response to this confession of faith: Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. "Blessed"—this fisherman Simon called blessed by the Son of God! Notice that Jesus does not say, "Blessed are you, Simon, because you've got so much going on upstairs—you are so smart!" Nor does Jesus say, "You are blessed because you know how to decipher public opinion polls, like the one about who people say I am." No, Simon was "blessed" simply because he was the object of God's care. God the Father had let Peter know who Jesus was. This Jesus was the Anointed One, the ultimate prophet and priest and king sent to bring people back to God, the one on whom all of history depends.

You see, Peter was blessed not because he did something for God, but because God did something for him: God revealed the identity of his only Son, something that brought Peter God's grace and peace.

Do you see anything in Peter you can identify with? He was a sinful man; so are we. Our thoughts far below Christ's; our words not as constructive; our actions not as God-honoring as his. God could have brushed us aside as he could have Peter and the others. But he didn't. Instead, he was concerned enough to reveal his only Son to us.

Just like Peter, we are blessed, because God has revealed his Son to us.  
Another reason...

### **Because God has given us a solid foundation**

After Peter made his confession of faith, his belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus said this to him: And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. There is something we should make clear here. The name "Peter" means "rock". The word was used usually to describe a big boulder. And so it sounds like Jesus is saying this: "Simon, you are now called 'rock', and on you I will build my church." But that's not what Jesus is saying. He is not saying that he will build his church, the family of God, on the man Peter, as if Peter will be the first pope. The Holy Spirit lets us in on this when he uses two different words for "rock." Peter is "rock", which in the original Greek language of the New Testament is the word petros. This word referred to a boulder. But when Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church," the Greek word is petra, which referred to a huge rock formation, like Sutter Butte or Morro Rock in California. No, when Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church," the rock is not Peter. The "rock" on which Jesus will build his church is the truth that Peter just said: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. On that rock solid truth, that confession of faith, the church is built.

If you know anything about this man Simon Peter, you know he needed something rock-solid to stand on as a foundation for his life. Once Peter and the other disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee, which Peter had fished on hundreds of times before. It was night. A furious squall whipped up. Then the disciples saw something on the lake that scared them out of their wits: a ghost! But the figure spoke to them. It was no ghost; it was Jesus, walking on the water of the lake. Seeing his Lord, Peter said, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come out to you on the water." And Jesus did! "Come," he said. And Peter did! He walked on the water to Jesus. At first, Peter was okay. He was doing fine when he was focusing on Jesus and his command, "Come." But when Peter started looking around and seeing the wind and the waves, he began to sink. Thankfully, Jesus was there to rescue him.

As long as Peter was resting on what the Father had revealed to him—that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God—he was okay. When he began to forget about those things, he was in trouble.

What is your foundation? What are you building your life on? Maybe you've never thought about it. But what is it that your life is built on? Or what is it that you consider more than anything else when you are faced with a big decision? Maybe it's concern for your family. Maybe it's career advancement. Maybe getting a big house and comfortable financial situation. Maybe finding true love. It could be that the guiding principle in your life is that there is no guiding principle in your life! You'll just do what you want and roll with the punches.

But amid all these choices, God offers this: "At the base of your life, as the thing that holds us up, how about letting it be a person. He is a person who was so committed to

you that he died in your place. He rescued you from being just another living being that thrives for a while and then dies. At the base of your life, as your personal foundation, how about Jesus, who loved you and gave himself for you, who loves you still and is alive and well and strong enough to do anything to help you?

God makes us part of a group that is held up and united—like bricks in a wall—by the fact that someone, the Son of God, loves us and forgives us all our errors and sins and gives us immortality. No one, not even Hell itself, can destroy this foundation and make us fall.

That's another reason why we're just like Peter—we are blessed because God has given us a solid foundation.

There's one more similarity to Peter we want to notice...

### **Because God involves us in his work**

Early in his ministry, Jesus had called Simon Peter to follow him. Jesus had turned a fisherman into a fisher of men. The other disciples, too—Jesus had called them out of other lines of work to learn from him and be trained by him. Here in Matthew 16 we find Jesus entrusting these followers of his with immensely important work. He says to Peter, representing the other disciples, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Do you understand what Jesus is authorizing these former fishermen to do? It's as if you were to get home today and find a message from the governor on the answering machine. "I have chosen..."—I'm not going to do an impression of Governor Schwarzenegger, so you'll just have to use your imaginations—"I have chosen to give you special authority. You now have the power to officially pardon people on death row. You may also lengthen the sentences of people who are in prison. You will have the full weight of my office behind you, whatever you declare." Jesus is entrusting to these men the power to lock and unlock heaven by forgiving sins of repentant sinners or not forgiving sins of those who refuse to let go of them.

But again, when you think about it, it is surprising that Jesus would give this kind of authority to Peter. Peter had his good moments. But he had his bad moments as well. If you read on a few verses in Matthew 16, Jesus is calling Peter "Satan" because Peter is so messed up! Or what about the time when Peter swore up and down that he didn't even know Jesus because he was embarrassed. Peter was flawed. He was often confused. Yet Jesus forgave him, equipped him and involved him in divine work.

Jesus does the same thing with us, you know.

Knowing what you know about Peter, you can imagine him coming to Jesus and saying, "Lord, I'd like to help you!" We can imagine Jesus responding, "Yeah... thanks. But, Peter, you're a mess! You don't think sometimes, when you do you think wrong, you often make bad decisions. Thanks for the offer to help, but I think I'm going to get someone more qualified, like a trained monkey!"

We can imagine Jesus saying that to us. After all, we are just as much a mess as Peter was. But instead Jesus says to us, "The past is forgotten. I'm giving you a new start. I'm calling to you. I'm sharing my work with you. Don't worry; I'll give you what you need. Go and serve. Be my hands in the world; care for people and love them. And be

my ambassadors. Go and announce pardon and freedom. Tell people who are now cut off from God that he has reached out for them and found them. Tell people I love them.”  
Just like Peter, we are blessed, because God involves us in his work.

I'm glad Pat Lambert's die landed on St. Peter. It's a good name for a group of Christians. Not because Peter is so exalted and worthy of honor, but rather because he is so ordinary. He is a sinner just like us, a sinner saved by the pardoning grace of God. Peter is a good namesake for our church because his story parallels our story.

- God has revealed his Son to us and connected us to that Son and the life that only he can give.
- God has given us a solid foundation, defining who we are and why we are here by his love for us in Christ.
- God involves us in his work. That gives us direction and purpose and meaning. We are Christ's disciples, his messengers to announce pardon and peace in his name.

When you see our church's logo or hear our church's name, remember that just like Peter, we are blessed. And remember most of all our loving God who blesses us.  
Amen.