

On this Rock
August 30, 2020

Rev. Kate Layzer

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL READING

In our gospel reading last week, we heard Jesus ask his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Safely out of earshot of Jesus’ many religious opponents, Peter blurted out a proclamation so daring, so game-changing, that Jesus said it could have only come from God: “You are *the Messiah*,” Peter said, “*the Firstborn of the Living God!*” Jesus welcomed this testimony—this radical new way of seeing who and what Jesus is—as the bedrock of faith he had been waiting for. Now, he told them, he could begin to build his church.

Today’s gospel picks up the story. Listen for the word of God in Matthew chapter 16, starting at verse 21.

Matthew 16:21–28

From that time on, Jesus began to explain to the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, to suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and religious scholars, and that he must be killed, and on the third day raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Rabbi!” he said. “This will never happen to you!” Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get yourself behind me, you Satan! You are trying to make me stumble and fall. You’re setting your mind not on the things of God, but of mortals.”

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very selves, take up the instrument of your own death and begin to follow in my footsteps. “If you would save your life, you will lose it; but if you would lose your life for my sake, you will find it. What profit would you show if you gained the whole world but lost yourself? What can you offer in exchange for your very self?”

“The Promised One will come in the glory of Abba God accompanied by the angels, and will repay all according to their conduct. The truth is, some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the coming of the Promised One’s reign.”

My first time reading any book of the New Testament from start to finish was in the spring semester of my first year of college, when my entire freshman class was assigned the gospel of Matthew. Since the student body was about 90 percent Jewish, the designers of the curriculum must have known very few of us would have read it. I remember sitting in the library after dinner, my feet propped on my study carrel, my paperback Jerusalem Bible in my lap, and my brow furrowed, feeling like a sailor lost at sea. *You try it, if you haven’t done it in a while.* It’s a strange and disorienting experience.

True, read it often enough, hear enough sermons preached on it, and after a while some of the strangeness wears off. But I still find the passage we heard today pretty jolting, even after 40 years. In the space of a few verses, Jesus goes from calling Peter blessed to calling him *Satan*—*Satan!*—a word that is hardly *ever* used in the scriptures, and only one other time in this whole gospel. And that one other time, Jesus is, in fact, talking to Satan.

You probably remember that story. It comes right after Jesus’ baptism, where he hears the voice of God calling him “*My own, my Beloved*”—then goes out into the wilderness to fast and to pray. When he gets really hungry, the tempter comes along and tries to get inside his head.

Jesus calls the tempter by the name “Satan,” and then doesn’t use that word again for 12 more chapters

—which is the literary equivalent of Matthew sticking a neon post-it note next to our reading today saying: “See chapter 4, vv. 1–11!” He wants us to put these two stories together.

So let’s put them together. What is it Satan is tempting Jesus with in chapter 4? He’s trying to lure him into using who he is for his own advantage—getting him to start thinking of himself as special; as set apart from the rest of human kind. IF you are the Only Begotten, he says, then prove it: Turn these stones to bread. Throw yourself off this building so angels can catch you. Worship me, and I will make you emperor.

Jesus is not blinded. He may not know yet exactly where he’s going, but knows who he belongs to. *“Away with you, Satan.”*

When he leaves that wilderness to begin his ministry, he walks out on two very human feet, a mortal subject to the same hurts, heartbreaks, and hungers as the rest of us—no exemptions, no special treatment.

So in our passage today, when Peter has shared his direct-from-God revelation about Jesus, and Jesus in turn begins to share HIS direct-from-God revelation—*“that he must go to Jerusalem, to suffer many things... and that he must be killed, and on the third day raised to life”*—and Peter, very naturally, says NO WAY, NUH-UH, THAT IS NOT HAPPENING, NO”—well, Jesus remembers who it is who talks like that, and he shuts him down.

“Get yourself behind me, you Satan—trying to make me stumble and fall. You’re setting your mind on the things of mortals, not of God.”

Oof. If that’s the rock Jesus is building his church on, then clearly things are going to be “rocky” in more ways than one. As they have been, from the beginning. As they continue to be. When has the church not had to face down the temptation to choose safety and security over sacrificial love? Jesus’ rebuke isn’t just for Simon Peter, but for every generation of disciples after him.

So he looks his followers in the face and tells them to prepare themselves for what is coming; assuring them that this valley of the shadow of death, this violent and brutal passage, will not be the end of the story, but its beginning—

and they have no idea what he is talking about, and I don’t blame them, because after 40 years of pondering and prayer, the mystery of Christ’s suffering is still fathomless to me. And no matter how many times I try to explain to myself or others all that I think it means, in the end, it’s beyond explanation how God could bring life out of the horror of the Cross.

But Jesus says he must go there. “Must”: That’s the word he uses. He *must* go to Jerusalem to suffer. He *must* be killed, and raised to life.

He must, because he has taken the world to his heart, and embraced it, all of it—yes, this world, our world, this place of storms and sickness, of bullets and bloodshed, cruelty and injustice, of lies and the lust for power and domination. Jesus enters it all, for there is no darkness that can keep him out, no place where the secret, transforming reconciling power of God cannot go.

The gospels are strange, baffling, at times infuriating texts. I had no idea, sitting in that library basement so many years ago, poring over Matthew, how the story it was telling would get inside my head. How it would draw me in, deeper and deeper. How it would save my life.

Slowly, over time, through the hearing of the gospels, Jesus has drawn my eyes to the needs of the world. He reaches out to heal the sick, and they become visible to me. He lays his hands on the hurting, and my gaze rests on them. He feeds the hungry, and I notice and try to follow his example. He shows mercy to sinners, and I recognize myself in them. He is betrayed, arrested, beaten, and lynched, and

this time, by the fathomless grace of God... this time I don't look away. Watching him, I begin to see past myself. I begin to let go of my own life, and discover a life I never dreamed of.

Are you able to stay with me? He asks. Are you able to go where I go, to be with yourselves and each other in your vulnerability and sin? Can you stay with all that it is to be human, broken yet beloved by God?

We are Peter. By ourselves, no, we can't. But bit by bit, with patience and compassion for our failings, perhaps we can learn to say, "I will, with the help of God."

On this rock, unlikely as it might seem, Jesus is building his church, for the healing of the earth. May it be so. And may God's broken and beloved church say Amen.

BENEDICTION

We go out now into a world of darkness and light.

We do not go alone. God is with us!

We go to face a world full of trouble and joy.

We do not go alone. Christ is with us!

We go to minister to a world of struggle and hope.

We do not go alone. the Spirit is with us!

May Christ help us to trust God's love,
to spread God's light, and to be God's people, today and always. Amen.