

"Messiah"

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, bless the words spoken and the thoughts and feelings of those who hear that you might reveal to us, the truth about Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.**

A man died and approached the Pearly Gates of heaven. Waiting for him at the Pearly Gates was St. Peter, who held the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Peter told him that he had to test everyone with a new point system. If you get 100 points, you're allowed to enter heaven. The man started by telling Peter that he did a lot of volunteer work for various charities. Peter nodded with a smile and marked him down for three points. The man thought again, then said that he tithed to the church. Peter nodded again and added two more points. The man, desperately searching his memory for something significant, finally said that he always tried to be nice to people and he never swore. Peter added another point. By now the man was getting frustrated and he blurted out, "This point system is impossible. At this rate, I'll only get into heaven by the grace of God." Peter smiled and said, "That's worth 100 points, come on in!"

In our gospel reading today, Jesus gives to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, even as we acknowledge, as we do in this joke, that we enter heaven by the grace of God.

Jesus seems to set Peter apart from the other disciples. Jesus first asks all of his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they respond with rumours that range from reincarnated John the Baptist; to Elijah, who, according to the scriptures, was taken up to heaven alive; to Jeremiah, a well-known prophet; and to any one of many other prophets. Then Jesus asks them a much more pointed, personal question, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter is sometimes a bit impetuous and Peter immediately answers Jesus' question, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Wow! One hundred points for Peter! And then Jesus vows to build his church upon Peter, the rock. He grants Peter the

keys to the kingdom of heaven and the power that whatever he binds or looses on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. Peter seems to be set apart with unusual authority and power.

Early Christian tradition has Peter founding the church at Rome and later being crucified in Rome along with the Apostle Paul. Apparently, Peter was crucified upside down at his own request because he saw himself as unworthy to be crucified in the same way as Jesus. Largely based upon Matthew 16:18 that we read this morning, the Catholic Church considers Peter to have been distinguished by Jesus as the first Bishop of Rome and every successor of Peter as Bishop of Rome is the head of the Christian church; who is now referred to as the Pope.

Jesus has travelled from the area of Tyre and Sidon to the town of Caesarea Philippi, which is near Mount Hermon about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Like Tyre and Sidon, it was also primarily a gentile city known in earlier times for the worship of Baal and Pan. In Jesus' time, there was an elaborate marble temple that had been erected by Herod the Great, father of the ruling Herod Antipas. In Caesarea Philippi, there was the worship of Greek gods and the worship of Caesar as a god himself. It was in this context that Jesus asks "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The title, *Son of Man* comes from the Old Testament apocalyptic Book of Daniel, where Daniel saw in a vision, "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven ... to him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away."

After the disciples respond with what people are saying, Jesus asks the important question, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter boldly replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Messiah means "anointed one." A messiah is usually a high priest or king, traditionally anointed with holy anointing oil. Typically, the messiah was a human leader physically descended from King David and King Solomon. Messiah in Greek is *khristos*, which became for Christians, the term Christ.

During the years before Jesus, there were many groups who claimed the Messiah had already come. They all had a charismatic leader that called followers

to revolt and overthrow the Romans. Rome killed the leader and crushed the movements. The dead leaders couldn't possibly be the Messiah. For the Romans, Caesar was the "son of god."

Back in the mid-1800s, a man in China named Hong Xiuquan claimed to be the Messiah. Hong had a nervous breakdown and had visions while convalescing. He read some Christian literature and came to believe that he was the Messiah. He claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ, another son of God. He gathered a huge following, raised an army, and took over half of China for about ten years. It turned into a long and bloody civil war called the Taiping Rebellion in which at least 20 to 30 million people died. Hong died and his kingdom fell.

In 1993 there was a TV report of a "Messiah sighting" in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. About twenty thousand Lubavitcher Hasidic Jews live in Crown Heights, and many of them believed the Messiah was dwelling among them in the person of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Word of the rabbi's public appearance spread like a flash fire through the streets of Crown Heights, and Lubavitchers in their black coats and curly sidelocks rushed toward the synagogue where the rabbi customarily prayed and they jammed by the hundreds into the main hall.

The rabbi was 91 years old. He had suffered a stroke the year before and had not been able to speak since. When the curtain finally pulled back, those who had crowded into the synagogue saw a frail old man with a long beard who could do little but wave, tilt his head, and move his eyebrows. No one in the audience seemed to mind, though. "Long live our master, our teacher, and our rabbi, King, Messiah, forever and ever!" they sang, over and over, until the rabbi made a small gesture with his hand and the curtain closed. They departed slowly, savoring the moment. Rabbi Schneerson died in June 1994 and some Lubavitchers are still awaiting his bodily resurrection.

We may chuckle, how could they believe such a thing: a 91 year-old mute Messiah in Brooklyn. But perhaps we react to Rabbi Schneerson like people in the first century reacted to Jesus. A Messiah from Galilee? A carpenter's kid? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Unlike others though, when Jesus was

crucified and died, he rose again on Easter morning and revealed himself as the Messiah, and the Son of God.

Jesus gave Simon son of Jonah the nickname, Peter. In Jesus' native language, Aramaic, the nickname is Cephas and the Greek translation is Petros. The word means "rock." The word "rock" had never before been used as a name, but Jesus' unusual nickname for Simon became a popular Christian name in the early Christian church. Jesus uses a little play on words in our passage today. Jesus literally says, "You are rock and upon this rock I will build my church."

When Peter exclaims to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Jesus responds, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Jesus is telling Peter that it's not Peter's doing; not his charitable work; not his tithing to the church; and not his kindness and discretion; it's God who has revealed this insight to Peter as a gift. It's by the grace of God that we receive divine insight, a gift that we're able to receive when we open ourselves to the love of God working in us and among us.

Like Peter and like Bartholomew, all of us here at St. Bartholomew's United Church are called to receive the gift of the divine revelation of Jesus Christ and to share this good news with others. We are the rock upon which the church continues to be built. Thanks be to God. Amen.