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**Series:** Wandering Hearts: Figuring Out Faith with Peter

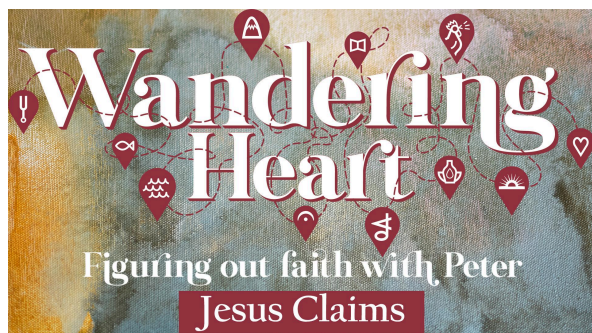
**Sermon Title:** Jesus Claims

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

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In these weeks leading to Easter, we are, of course, following Jesus to Jerusalem, but we are also following Jesus through the eyes and ears and heart of Peter. He was a fisherman, originally called Simon, who was called by Jesus to help in catching people. He was renamed Peter from the get-go in the story from Luke's gospel a couple of weeks ago. Today, in Matthew's gospel, we get Matthew's version of how Simon gets his new name. Whichever name you use, and sometimes both are used, Simon Peter has much that we can relate to in his interactions with Jesus. I hope you've seen that in these first weeks of the series.

Today's story about Peter begins as they enter the area of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks his disciples two questions. The first: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And the second: "But who do you say that I am?" The disciples answer the first question by listing a few names from the past: John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. But it's Peter who answers the second, and more important, question: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We know this is the right answer because the narrator told us in the first sentence of Matthew's gospel even before he gets to the long list of names in chapter one. "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1).

As I prepare for sermons, I am always learning. Sometimes I share what is new to me, sometimes I keep it to myself because it's so obvious that I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know it. Here's what I didn't know about this passage, and I think it's because I've always skipped over WHERE this story happened in order to get to WHAT happened—Peter's profession of faith. But before we dive more into Peter's profession, let's look for a minute at the geographical mention that begins this story. It's a key piece of information that ends up informing what happens in this exchange between Jesus and his disciples.

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” (Matthew 16:13). Caesarea Philippi. Basically, if it were in Indiana, we might translate that as “Caesarville.” Once upon a time, it was known as the region of Naphtali. According to the Book of Genesis, Naphtali was the sixth son of Jacob. He was the founder of the Israelite tribe of Naphtali. So this was an Israelite place. A God place. But, like the Soviets who could not stand to have a town named “Saint Petersburg” and so changed it to “Leningrad,” so the Romans changed names when it suited them better and they changed Naphtali to “Caesarea of Philip” or “Caesarea Philippi.”

Around 20 B.C. Caesar Augustus had given the town and its surrounding region to King Herod. Herod built up the city, including a temple of white marble that honored the cult of Caesar. After Herod died in 4 B.C., the region passed to King Philip, who further built up the place and renamed it “Philip’s Caesarville” or Caesarea Philippi so as to flatter and honor his patron, Caesar Augustus. In other words, this was a place that oozed of politics. It was a place that worshiped Augustus, a place filled with political patronage and a reveling in all things worldly. Translated to a twenty-first century context, this would be a place that would be crawling with highly paid lobbyists of single-interest groups that work the system for influence and manipulation and power.

This area, even though it was within the borders of ancient biblical Israel, was predominantly occupied by Gentiles with a history of pagan worship. God-fearing Jews would have avoided the area. Imagine the disciples’ surprise, then, when Jesus takes them right into the heart of this pagan community and asks these questions. There is much symbolism in Jesus choosing this location to reveal himself as the Messiah. I don’t think it was any coincidence that it was here that Jesus asked his famous question, “Who do people say that I am?”

To ask that question there, in the shadow of political power, transforms it from an idle question of curiosity into a loaded question bristling with implications. It would have been one thing for Jesus to ask this in some quiet village in Galilee, but it’s quite another matter to ask it in Caesarville. To ask these questions in Caesarville only heightened the drama of it. When Peter gives his clarion confession that Jesus is the Christ, there was more than a touch of revolutionary zeal in what he said. They were in King Philip’s city dedicated to Augustus. Peter’s saying that Jesus is the Christ was a shot across the Roman political bow.<sup>1</sup>

For his part, Jesus knew deep in his heart that political pomp and circumstance and earthly glory were neither his destiny nor his goal. His warning to the disciples in verse 20, “Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (Matthew 16:20), is called the “Messianic Secret” by scholars because this is not the only place that he gives this warning. There’s not a hard and fast reason for keeping it quiet. Here it seems it did not stem from some fear that they’d be arrested for sedition. Jesus simply did not want to get swept up in a political campaign; it was the first example of

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<sup>1</sup> Idea and information about the importance of location in this passage from Sermon Commentary for Sunday, August 23, 2020 on Matthew 16:13-20 by Scott Hoezee found at [www.cepreaching.org](http://www.cepreaching.org)

separation of church and state. Messiahs were largely political figures, and Jesus didn't need that confusion.

It is against that backdrop that Jesus asks these two questions and Peter gets the second question right. Jesus confirms it is the right answer by praising Peter's insight and bestowing upon him "the keys of the kingdom." But the answer is just the beginning. Jesus' response to Peter indicates that his identity as Messiah did not come to him by way of human insight. According to Matthew, the answer is a matter of Peter's discernment of divine revelation and not obvious to "flesh and blood." We obviously think of Jesus as the messiah and no one else really fits into our definition, but in first-century Judaism, there was no single understanding of "messiah." The Hebrew "*mashiah*," from which we get the English "messiah," means "anointed." A messiah was one anointed by God for a special purpose. In that day, a messiah could be a prophet or a king, perhaps a warrior, or perhaps not. Then, like now, faithful people interpreted the scriptures differently, and there were diverse understandings of how God's anointed one would come on the scene.<sup>2</sup>

We are comfortable with Peter's profession of faith because it is our profession of faith as Christians. In our tradition, it is the ONLY test of faith, the ONLY question asked when you come forward to unite with this congregation or any church in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). There are no other boxes to check. I wonder if we in the church—including those of us who preach each Sunday—appreciate how much flows out of that most basic Christian affirmation that "Jesus is Lord!"

One of the simplest prayers of the church has for centuries been known as "The Jesus Prayer." It goes like this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." If Jesus is who he said he was and who Peter affirmed him to be, then that short prayer packs more power than the most eloquent sermon, the most lyric psalm, or the best hymn ever written. Last week, we began this year's pastors class to prepare our 5<sup>th</sup> graders (and a couple of 6<sup>th</sup> graders) to make their profession of faith. There are 16 students, and each one, over the course of the class, is asked to write their credo. A credo is a statement of belief. For them, each of the four statements start with the words, "I believe..." about God, Jesus, Holy Spirit and Church.

Claiming what we believe and even writing it down or saying it out loud is important. I'm an NPR listener and supporter, and one of the programs I really liked was called, *This I Believe*. What I didn't know was that *This I Believe* dated much further back than its 2005 to 2009 run on NPR. *This I Believe* was originally a five-minute program, originally hosted by journalist Edward R. Murrow from 1951 to 1955 on CBS Radio Network. The show encouraged both famous and everyday people to write short essays about their own personal motivation in life and then read them on the air. *This I Believe* became a cultural phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From Commentary on Matthew 16:13-20 by Marilyn Salmon, August 24, 2008 found at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>3</sup> Information about the series "This I Believe" found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This\\_I\\_Believe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_I_Believe)

I went looking this week in the archives for an episode that I vaguely remembered about a man searching for meaning after a challenging childhood. That man, I discovered, was University of Illinois journalism professor John W. Fountain. Let's listen to Fountain in his own words:

*I believe in God. Not that cosmic, intangible spirit-in-the-sky that Mama told me as a little boy "always was and always will be." But the God who embraced me when Daddy disappeared from our lives—from my life at age four—the night police led him away from our front door, down the stairs in handcuffs. The God who warmed me when we could see our breath inside our freezing apartment, where the gas was disconnected in the dead of another wind-whipped Chicago winter, and there was no food, little hope and no hot water.*

*The God who held my hand when I witnessed boys in my hood swallowed by the elements, by death and by hopelessness, who claimed me when I felt like "no-man's son," amid the absence of any man to wrap his arms around me and tell me, "everything's going to be okay," to speak proudly of me, to call me son. I believe in God, God the Father, embodied in his Son Jesus Christ. The God who allowed me to feel His presence—whether by the warmth that filled my belly like hot chocolate on a cold afternoon, or that voice, whenever I found myself in the tempest of life's storms, telling me (even when I was told I was "nothing") that I was something, that I was His, and that even amid the desertion of the man who gave me his name and DNA and little else, I might find in Him sustenance.*

*I believe in God, the God who I have come to know as father, as Abba—Daddy. I always envied boys I saw walking hand-in-hand with their fathers. I thirsted for the conversations fathers and sons have about the birds and the bees, or about nothing at all—simply feeling his breath, heartbeat, presence. As a boy, I used to sit on the front porch watching the cars roll by, imagining that one day one would park and the man getting out would be my daddy. But it never happened.*

*When I was 18, I could find no tears that Alabama winter's evening in January 1979 as I stood finally—face to face—with my father lying cold in a casket, his eyes sealed, his heart no longer beating, his breath forever stilled. Killed in a car accident, he died drunk, leaving me hobbled by the sorrow of years of fatherlessness. By then, it had been years since Mama had summoned the police to our apartment that night, fearing that Daddy might hurt her—hit her—again. Finally, his alcoholism consumed what good there was of him until it swallowed him whole.*

*It wasn't until many years later, standing over my father's grave for a long overdue conversation, that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized fully that in his absence, I had found another. Or that He—God, the Father, God, my Father—had found me.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Link to the audio clip and manuscript used in the sermon found at: <https://thisibelieve.org/essay/35/>

That was basically John Fountain's profession of faith—his answer to Jesus' question: "Who do YOU say that I am?" What we believe about God matters. More than anything else in this world. And there is no more important time to wrestle with this than right now. In the midst of all that we go through in our lives, it is important to own Peter's profession as our own and let Jesus claim us. We confess once again our faith in Jesus, believing, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We proclaim that he is the son of the living God who promises to be with us in our every storm, who offers us a peace that surpasses understanding, and who assures us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age. That is who Jesus is. This I believe.