

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 16:13-20

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,
he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah,
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,
the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,
and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."
Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

This is the story of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah—the "Messianic confession."
It is really the first part of a two-part story concluded next week (for those following the lectionary) . Part two is a continuation of Matthew's story of Jesus' redefinition of the Messianic tradition. I suggest you learn both stories at one time because they are linked closely together.

The verbal threads in this story are:

1. "Who do people say...?" and "But who do you say...?"
2. "Whatever you bind on earth..." and "Whatever you loose on earth..." The parallelism in this bind/loose saying makes this section easier to remember.

The sequence of the episodes in this story begins with the episodes about "who do people say" and "who do you say." These two episodes have an a/b, a/b structure: question/disciples' answer, question/Peter's answer. The third episode is the blessing of Simon Peter. The conclusion of this part of the messianic discourse is that Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." This sets up part two of the story to be continued next week.

This story is a major turning point in the Gospel of Matthew. It is the first time that it is explicitly stated what is thus far implicit. The "Son of Man" is a title used for Jesus that basically means a human being. It also has the connotations that come from the use of Son of Man in Daniel where it refers to a representative of humanity in the divine court (see Daniel 7:13). Jesus has a multiple role: Son of Man and Messiah.

The messianic tradition is a tradition of military leaders and kings of Israel. They were “the anointed.” Matthew paints his picture of Jesus against the background of Saul and David as paradigmatic Messiahs. The realization that Jesus is the Messiah involves a major re-conception of what it means to be the Messiah. This should be reflected in the way you tell Simon Peter’s confession. Tell it as a dawning realization.

People see Jesus in the stream of the prophetic tradition: Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist. It dawns on Simon that Jesus is part of the messianic tradition. The messianic tradition is a completely different tradition than the prophetic tradition. It is the tradition of the kings of Israel. Components of the messianic tradition are the defeat of Israel’s enemies and the establishment of the nation. Simon Peter’s recognition of Jesus as Messiah introduces a new concept of Jesus’ identity.

Jesus’ response to Simon affirms Simon’s insight. Jesus blesses Simon just as Israel blessed Jacob (see Gen. 27). It is a formal blessing which uses Simon’s formal name: Simon, son of Jonah. The blessing is heightened, performative speech that needs to be told in a joyful manner.

In the next episode Jesus gives Simon a new name—Peter—which means “rock,” just as Jacob means “God-wrestler.” The gift of a new name is a sign of affection and honor. A granting of authority follows the blessing—the authority to have the keys to the kingdom of Heaven and to bind and loose. This pronouncement makes it clear that Peter’s authority is a spiritual authority over a spiritual kingdom, not a political authority over an earthly kingdom.

This first section of the messianic discourse ends with the command that the disciples tell no one. Why? That is not made clear; nevertheless, it *is* clear that they are to tell no one. What is implied by what follows this story is that they are to tell no one because, while Jesus recognizes that he is going to be killed, he doesn't want it to happen before the appropriate time. The need for secrecy is confirmed at Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin. As soon as Jesus publicly announces that he is the Messiah, he is condemned to death.