

“Upon This Rock” based on Matthew 16:13-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, August 27, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Yesterday, we spent a lot of time as a family over at Grammy and Grandfather’s house. The only reason we considered looking for a new call a few years ago was a longing amid the height of the pandemic to be closer to them. Lo and behold, God called us to Shelby.

And so, we were excited to be near them in Candler, and more so that now they are even closer to us, having moved into a house right here in town. So, amid a couple of tasks here and there, and lunch, a pillow fight broke out – and the kids love these. Grammy has named them, “Palooza,” and so, with soft pillows, inflatables, and lots of tickling, we laugh, a lot.

When I got home, I was exhausted. I think the kids could have gone on for hours and hours more still. As I went to open my door, I found a few pages from the Shelby Star wedged in. I’m not sure who, but I’m guessing one of y’all who dropped off the articles for me. Now, I don’t know if you wanted me to read about the mosaic or read the column about belief and ethics.

Both were interesting, but it was the column that really piqued my interest. The author, under the mantra of “free-thinking,” states that he was once inclined to believe what he has heard, but now, he knows that “I believe,” means little without “I live.”

The former Presbyterian pastor and chaplain confesses that when he became knowledgeable, specifically, about the bible, he discovered what he had been told, was not true. He said he had not seriously chosen his beliefs, but only accepted them. So, the creed he loved in place of those of the Church was that of Robert Green Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic, as he is known, who said, “My creed is this: Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so.” The columnist said he sees no improvement on this creed.

Now, throughout my whole life, I have always been a skeptic. I do not like to accept anything without intense scrutiny. I love to read books that challenge my mode of thought and my assumptions. I don’t like to just read things that agree with what I already think. I like to be stretched. I am a firm believer that we must choose our beliefs, rationally as best we can. This is because if you have never doubted your beliefs, how can you embrace them? After all, if faith is belief in what cannot be seen, but only hoped for, then the opposite of faith is not doubt or skepticism. The opposite of faith then becomes certainty. If I know something to be true, without the ability to question, then what need have I for faith?

Yet, I wonder if the columnist, who touts his own free-thinking persona as a humanist, would consider me a free thinker, since I trust the historic teachings of the church. I can’t say this about him, since this was my first encounter with his writing, but often those who claim the mantle of being a “free-thinker,” whether they are enlightenment thinkers or internet “researchers,” they often see something which they oppose as bound and unfree. Only their own thoughts or ones like them as free.

In his book, “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion,” author Jonathan Haidt, himself a centrist political thinker and agnostic religiously, puts forth the idea that in each of us, there is an elephant and a rider. Our rider is tasked with using reins to steer the elephant where we want. The rider is our rational mind, our conscious decision maker. The

elephant is our emotions and our underlying world view. We all think our rider is in charge. We think the rider is steering the elephant, but the elephant goes where it wants to go. The truth is that none of us are “free-thinkers” in the way that we think we are. We are all bound to our elephant and what moves that elephant is not reason, but it is story.

What is the story that has gripped you and moved your elephant? In this column, the writer presents a storyline to move your elephant: He says, I was lied to when I was young, and those people had power over me. I’ve pushed off the yoke they put on me. Now I’m in control as an individual. “They” used theology for power. My motives I know are good.

It is compelling, for sure. But for me, my testimony of faith is based on a powerless theology. Yes, when theology and government are mixed, it equals unbelievable power. That is true. But also when agnostic philosophy and government are mixed, they yield unbelievable power as well. Just look at what the enlightenment “free-thinkers” did in France in the revolution, and the “Reign of Terror,” by which dissenters were executed. The thing is that when there is absolute power, it tends to become corrupt. There’s a saying about that from Lord Acton.

I agree with the writer that it is true that what we believe has to be lived out, as it was in the early church. With no promise of power and denying worldly gain, the first believers in Jesus went to their death, not in combat, but out of faithful love. They acted in imitation of their God. That’s my elephant’s story.

Last week, we saw Jesus make a point about the contrast between what is holy and common. His point was that it is not what we do in terms of our outward piety that makes us holy, but what comes out of us, what we do, that reveals what God we trust. To be defiled is not to be irreparably marked, ruined, spoiled, or violated. No, to be defiled is to be just like the world, common, like everyone else. This is not in the sense of being an ordinary, average Jane or Joe, but in the sense of being carried on an elephant that justifies sin in pursuit of desires, be it comfort, popularity, power, wealth, or another false god. Actions matter.

In today’s gospel, Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about his identity. In doing so, he refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” a theologically dense term, which draws on the book of Daniel, and his vision of “one like a Son of Man.” This vision has the Son of Man in the throne chariot of God, the Ancient of Days, and this human figure shares in the identity of God and God’s power, being given dominion and authority over all the nations. In the time of Jesus, it was a time of great anticipation for the Son of Man, and so Jesus assumes this title in asking, whether the people perceive him this way. Or is he just a teacher and healer.

The disciples do not take this question as about the “Son of Man” figure in Daniel, but recognize that in using this title, Jesus is referring to his own identity and reputation. The opinions of the people are that he is someone who has come back. Notice, they wonder if he is John the Baptist who was killed shortly before by Herod. Elijah was alive taken by chariot into the presence of God and prophesied to return in the time of the Messiah. Is he Elijah? Still others said he was a resurrected prophet, be it Jeremiah or another one.

Then Jesus asks, “Who do you all say that I am?” He asks them all to weigh in on this question. Only Peter steps up, presumably for the group, and he fills in the rest of the titles, the fullness of Jesus’s identity, saying, “You are the Messiah, meaning Anointed King, the Son of the living God.” In these

couple of verses, Jesus is marked with the fullness of his identity, as that Son of Man figure who assumes dominion over the earth. He is the anointed King who is to restore Israel and the Son of the Living God – truly divine.

My sisters and brothers, part of what marked out Israel as different from the nations around it, was its view of God and view of humanity in relation to God and all of creation. In the Greek and Roman Mythology, Zeus or Jupiter, the high god, defeated his father, Kronos. He assumed the role of the highest authority, and in Canaanite religion, likewise, the god Baal usurped his father El, to take control. In both systems then, humanity is expected to serve the gods, who use their power to exploit human dependents. But in Israel's scriptures, the usurper – the Devil – is defeated. The Son figure is co-equal in power, and humans are made in God's image to love and be loved.

The story to which Israel is tied – it's elephant – is different and so they were to be different. They were to be holy as a light to all the nations to reveal this God, the true God, to all people. Peter in speaking for all the apostles, sees this story and proclaims it, not because he understands it – we'll see next week that he does not – but because he sees where it is going by God's revelation. The Father has revealed this to him.

The story of God in the Hebrew scriptures is of a God who acts, entering into creation. When humanity turns away, trusting in their own knowledge of good and evil, they give themselves over to lesser things, false gods, and struggles for power. The God of Israel comes down, defeating those lesser gods, whether it be by the flood, or in the Exodus from Egypt, or in the conquest of the promised land, and return from exile, always God comes down to the people, for their sake. It's not for God's sake. God doesn't need anything, but God loves humanity. God loves you and me.

Ultimately, this is what Peter and the disciples recognize – God has come down to them again. God is sitting with them. Even though they are oppressed by Rome, divided in religion and practice, God has come to be their anointed King, to be their Messiah to destroy the remaining powers. The Messiah Jesus is the one in the throne of God the most high – one with God, in all glory, power, majesty and might – and yet again, sitting with them. Indeed, they recognize the magnitude of who Jesus is then, even though they do not yet have the full story, as we see next week when Peter doesn't want Jesus to die.

What we have is the recognition of the incarnation – that the one true God has come down, having sent the Son, fully one and eternal with the Father, to share in our humanity, to live as we live, and as we know, but Peter didn't know in our reading today, to die the most shameful death, by Jewish and Gentile standards. He is hanged on a cross, but only to rise again on the third day to new life, a life is now shared with us, God's life, abundant and eternal, so that we might now share in God's work, revealing God by reconciling all things in Christ through love. By this we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live what we believe.

Friends, the columnist is right – “I believe” means little without “I live.” But what we believe in shapes our idea of what it means to live, to love one another. If we remove God and happiness alone is the aim, what happens if my happiness, as I perceive it, or the happiness of those I choose to make happy, comes in conflict with the perceived happiness of another? Happiness is very subjective. How many times have we heard this in recent years, where people say, “My rights and freedom are more important than someone else's happiness – their life, or their dignity.

This is used as an excuse to be concerned with the happiness of one group, over the happiness of another group – this is the basis of what we call identity politics. Whether it is espoused on the right or the left in our culture, it is the elephant is deciding whose happiness is most important. It's not the rider, yet we think we have all the answers.

This is why scripture is a story, and not a list of exactly “don't do this, or do that,” and a direct answer to every question in your life. It's not that. That's why it frustrates me when people try to make the bible an encyclopedia. It's not. The Bible is a story to move our elephant so that our minds might be renewed, as Paul says, and our rational worship will be in how we live in sacrifice to the true God revealed in that story. This is why we put others before ourselves, and knowing God is with us, empowering us to make the difficult choices. We trust God because of who God is revealed to be, and what God has done and promised.

My children love me because of what I do, who I have revealed myself to be in their lives. This is not to say that what I do earns their love – but they trust in me. The story of their life has been dependance on me for everything, and as they get older and as sad as it might be for me, they will become less and less dependent on me and Claire. The story will change. It will require us less and less. But my hope is that they will still know that my interest is them, and their well-being. My hope is that my love for them means I will be there as I can be for their needs. I want them to know this is who I am as their Father, and who their mother is as their Mother, who their grandparents are, and so on, as best we all can.

When Jesus says to Peter that “on this rock I will build my church,” his confession is the rock. The rock is not Peter. It is the confession of recognizing who God truly is and how God comes into our lives. This is so that no matter how independent we get, as we get older and think we've got it all figured out, we recognize that God is still with us. God is true, not just real, but true in that God is present in our lives – God is with us. This is good news. Jesus reveals God and Jesus is our rock, our foundation.

Feed this story to your elephant. Let it guide you because it will carry you, loosing you from the bondage of this world, through the love of a very personal God. Amen.