

Message for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (8/23/2020)
Matthew 16:13-20

I'm fairly certain that this is the first time I've ever preached about dinosaurs. Dinosaur fans, you are hereby notified that a dinosaur sermon is coming your way.

Have you heard of Sue? Of the more than thirty skeletons of *Tyrannosaurus rex* that have been found, Sue is the largest. She's also the most complete at about 90%. Paleontologists love Sue because she's an excellent specimen for studying the species, and Chicago's Field Museum, where Sue resides, can make replicas of her skeleton to share with dinosaur lovers everywhere. Sue is arguably the most famous fossil in the world.¹

Dinosaur fossils are bones turned to stone, as mineral-rich water seeped into the animals' remains and transformed them into something much harder over tens of millions of years.² Sometimes we call this process *petrification*, from the Greek word *petra*, for rock. Fossils are gateways to the distant past, remnants of ancient creatures and peoples that tell us a great deal about who they were and how they lived.

This brings me to Simon, that first disciple whom Jesus called "Peter," *Petros* – a title or nickname, not a proper name. "Blessed are you, Simon son of

¹ <https://www.fieldmuseum.org/blog/sue-t-rex>.

² <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/fossilized-dinos-are-bones-turned-stone-sometimes-part-original-dino-survives-180961042/>.

Jonah,” Jesus declares in our Gospel from Matthew today, “I tell you, you are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my church....”

Maybe we should have called Simon “Rocky” in English instead of “Peter,” or “Simon the Rock,” in order to get the point across. In any case, if I had the privilege of subtitling this passage, I’d call it “Simon is petrified.” And, I don’t mean that Simon is afraid, although that’s certainly the case in other episodes in the Gospel of Matthew. I mean that **Simon becomes a fossil of sorts, a lasting example of faith for future generations to rediscover.**

Although he’s named first among the Twelve Apostles and credited with key leadership in the early church, Peter’s prominence in the sacred story is not a matter of personal attainment. As we’ll discover in the very next scene (the Gospel for next Sunday), at this point in the story Peter fundamentally misunderstands Jesus’ purpose. He gets the title right: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But, Peter doesn’t know what that title means, certainly not what the Messiah’s fate will be.³ And, lest we forget that he exhibits the fickleness common to all disciples, recall that Peter is Jesus’ chief denier at the decisive moment.⁴

No, **Peter’s faith is not a hard-won achievement, but a gift of God.**

“Blessed are you,” Jesus replies to Peter’s confession, “for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” In other words, Peter doesn’t discern Jesus’ identity by virtue of some superior insight; he is the

³ Matthew 16:21-28.

⁴ Matthew 26:69-75.

beneficiary of God's gracious revelation. The apostle Paul puts it plainly: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."⁵

And, if Peter's faith is a gift, then so are his identity and vocation. This Gospel text is famous for Peter's profession of faith: "You are the Messiah...." But, Jesus also professes faith in him: "Blessed are you, Simon.... You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and [even death] will not prevail against it." In other words, ***You have been petrified, preserved as a model for disciples to come. In spite of Peter's faults, Jesus entrusts him with the sacred work of God's kingdom, to be a paradigm of faith for posterity. And, this is a profound, God-given purpose.***

Of course, Peter is a rock only because Jesus is himself the Rock, the foundation on which the whole structure is built. "See, I am laying in Zion a stone," Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah in his first letter, "a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."⁶ The seventh-century theologian Bede put it this way: "This [first] rock, that is, the Lord Savior... gave to [Simon] who knew him, loved him, and confessed him, the privilege of sharing his name...."⁷ **If Simon is petrified, if Simon is the Rock, it's only on account of Christ the Cornerstone.**

And in this way, Peter stands in for all of us. He is representative of the enduring privilege and challenge of discipleship. "Come to [Christ], a living

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

⁶ 1 Peter 2:6; Isaiah 28:16. See also 1 Corinthians 10:4.

⁷ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-8-23/2120#resources>.

stone,” Peter writes, “though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....”⁸ **You are a rock, beloved, and on this rock God will continue to build the church, the spiritual house where Christ has chosen to live in every generation for the sake of love.** Membership in this house is not a mark of superiority, but a gift. So, thanks be to God, the one who through Christ grants the revelation that inspires our faith, the one who blesses us, the one who gives us a new name and a new calling in service of the kingdom of heaven on Earth.⁹

⁸ 1 Peter 2:4-5.

⁹ See M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, 347.