

Sermon (est. 12 min)

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

I've been coming to St Thomas for less than a year; so I ought to introduce myself. I'm Sheldon Campbell; I grew up Methodist, and was a lay speaker in the United Methodist church so preached sermons a handful of times before, you don't have to be kind and say 'aw, it's his first time isn't that cute'.

I'm a pathologist specializing in the laboratory diagnosis of infectious diseases, I practice at the VA hospital and the Yale medical school. You may not know anything about medical school teaching, but I'll tell you that for me, being up here without my Powerpoint slides is like trying to walk without both feet, but I'll just have to soldier on. Someday sermons will have Powerpoint slides maybe.

I'm a scientist; so my instinct is to break a problem into the smallest possible bits; and I'm a songwriter; so I'm often looking for the exact right word.

The Gospel passage today centers on one great sentence:

“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.”

Sure, there's a lot of mystical mumbo-jumbo surrounding it – do NOT tell the next rector I called it that, I like it here – but that's the action statement.

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...

There are three interesting words in that sentence. They are rock, build, and church.

Jesus isn't obscure what he wants his **church** to be; what He wants it to do. He explains very early in his ministry, when he shows up in his home town to preach – that never goes well, by the way.

“So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down.¹

The mission here is pretty plain, right? All we have to do is agree on what *exactly* the gospel -- the good news – sounds like to the poor, how *exactly* one heals the brokenhearted, which of all us captives get *exactly* how much liberty and what happens when – not if – we misuse it, how to deal with all the stuff the blind people end up seeing when they recover their sight, because it's not necessarily pretty, what happens when those oppressed folks start oppressing in their turn, and what, exactly, the acceptable year of the Lord is supposed to look like.

<long pause> I've got nothing, people. Besides, that passage wasn't in the lectionary, so I am not responsible for it, and thank goodness for *that*. But it is a fair summary of what Jesus means by 'church'.

The second interesting word in the sentence:

¹ Luke 4 16-20

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...

...is **‘build’**.

Building is *hard*.

It is *so* much more work to build than to destroy. Destruction and decay happen all by themselves. Anyone here from the vestry? I want to ask you a question, you don't have to answer it out loud. Is this building falling apart faster than we're repairing it? I just wanted to see the look on your faces. Good enough.

I hate to tell you this – Morgen hates it even more – but we are enormous nerds in our family. Our favorite TV is – get this – the Weather Channel. Snicker – right.

A few years ago they did a show on ‘abandoned places’. There are factories, town buildings, and other old places in Detroit that have been abandoned since so many people moved away; for maybe 20 years, a mere moment of time relative to, say, the time of Christ. A photographic team documented what happened. These great, well built places are coming apart *incredibly* rapidly. Water makes it way in, freezes and thaws. Rebar rusts. Concrete rots. Pianos left behind warp, distort, fall to pieces. One story collapses and brings down the story below it. People break the glass, carry away things of value, or of no value. Trees grow up into the gaps, and roots tear apart the structure. Twenty years, and these **buildings** that took thousands of worker-years to **build**, are beyond salvage.

But you're saying to me ‘lots of things last. Look at the Pyramids. Or Machu Piccu’.

Those are big piles of rock, people. *Everything* else they made so long ago is gone; oh, not all of it, but 99.something percent. The impressive big piles of rock remain because they are.. impressive **big piles of rock**. Anything more interesting *does not last*. Building is **hard**.

Jesus asked Peter no small thing.

Before I go any farther I'm obliged to tell you that Morgen's tastes in television and culture in general are wider and less weird than mine, and thank goodness for that. She is *not* as enormous a nerd as I am. I had to say that because she knows where I sleep.

What is the *church* built of? It's built of people, Heaven help us. Stone would be way easier to work with, even if it's got it's own problems, looking at you again, vestry, right? But compared with people, stone is *great*. It's hard to shape but at least it stays where it's put. I'd rather try to build with Jell-O. At least Jell-O is *predictable*.

So, Jesus is contemplating *building* a *church*:

To preach the gospel to the poor;
... to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

The third interesting word in the sentence:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...
...is *rock*.

The most interesting question of history is always, What were these people *thinking*?²

Assume for a moment you're Jesus... and if you're Jesus, you've got a pretty clear idea of what's coming, and who you're dealing with, right?

You're sitting there and you look over at Peter. You think back on Peter's career as an apostle. And perhaps forward to what you know is coming.

² Lois McMaster Bujold, Captain Vorpatril's Alliance

Right after feeding the five thousand, Jesus sent the disciples across the sea while he went up to pray. We heard this scripture last week. The winds were contrary, so in the middle of the night they were still out there; and that's not good, in a boat at night in the middle of the sea a long time before GPS or even artificial light other than fires. It's dark at night. Boats wreck all the time. Presumably that's why Jesus decided to walk to them. They needed the help.

And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." 28 And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. 30 But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"³

You wonder if Jesus thought back on that incident and thought 'yeah, he's the rock. He sure sinks like one'.

Assuming Jesus had some foreknowledge of what was to come, he might've thought ahead to the confusion of the arrest in Gethsemane. The guards were about to arrest everyone and sort it out later.

Jesus answered, "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way," 9 that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, "Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none." 10 Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. .. 11 So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?"⁴

This isn't early in Jesus' ministry, it's at the very end. Even allowing for the circumstances, this has a definite 'not getting the memo' vibe, doesn't it? Why was Peter even carrying a sword? A sword isn't a tool,

³ Matthew 14:25-30

⁴ John 18:8-11

or even a hunting weapon, it's *only* for fighting other people. Hadn't Jesus talked about this, well, a lot?

Talk about unclear on the concept; maybe Jesus calls Peter a rock because he's as bright as one.

And then the arrest, and Peter sort of follows along behind.

“15 And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. ... 17 Then the servant girl who kept the door said to Peter, “You are not also one of this Man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” 18 Now the servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. ...25 Now Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. Therefore they said to him, “You are not also one of His disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not!” 26 One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of him whose ear Peter cut off, said, “Did I not see you in the garden with Him?” 27 Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed.”⁵

Well *that's* promising, right? This is exactly what we want in the guy that's going to have to build – and building is hard, remember – the church.

What was Jesus *thinking*? *This guy* is your *rock*?

Except. *Peter always showed up.*

The world is built by the people who show up for the job⁶.

Peter is the one who tried to walk across to Jesus. He sank like a ...rock... but still. He tried to defend Jesus at the arrest when everyone else ran off; a misguided effort if ever there was one, but he was there. He denied Jesus three times after His arrest; but he was there.

⁵ John 18:15, 17-18, 25-27

⁶ Lois McMaster Bujold, Cryoburn

So, how'd that decision work out for Jesus? I guess we have to say, 'not bad'. Something over *2 billion* people agree to call themselves 'Christians'; if on practically nothing else, and if we haven't proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord; or even the half-decent year of the Lord, well, we're still working on it. According to that definitive source, Wikipedia:

"According to Catholic tradition, the apostolic see of Rome was founded by Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the first century. The papacy is one of the most enduring institutions in the world and has had a prominent part in human history."

So the primary office in the largest of the Christian sects is defined primarily by its succession – spiritually, not genetically, we're not a hereditary monarchy or anything – from Peter, the 'rock'. And we in the Episcopal church, broadly, trace that line of succession as well.

I'm sneaking several quotes from one of my favorite science-fiction authors, Lois McMaster Bujold, into this sermon. Here's one more.

"I always thought my parents could fix anything. Now it's my turn. Dear God, how did this *happen?*"⁷

You knew I was going to get around to us, didn't you? Finally, right?

Peter's primary qualification for being the rock the church is built on was – he showed up.

If I've learned anything in thirty-odd years of running a medical laboratory, it's that the perfect person for the job is *never* available. Me included. The perfect people for the job must live in North Dakota, since I've never been there. It's the only possible explanation.

Since no one is perfect, it follows that all great deeds have been accomplished out of imperfection. Yet they were accomplished, somehow, all the same.⁸

⁷ Lois McMaster Bujold, *Diplomatic Immunity*

⁸ Lois McMaster Bujold, *Mirror Dance*

Our inclusive communion sort of reflects this, though personally I'd rewrite it; nobody's excluded not because all are worthy; I beg to differ; but because we are all *equally unworthy*. I can get behind that one.

On this rock I will build my church.

It's late August in New England. Summer's almost over. It's really nice outside and it won't be that way much longer. Summer is far too short.

And yet, here we are. A bunch of rocks, I guess. Lord knows I'm unclear on the concept most of the time. If we were much brighter than rocks we'd be over in the park right now. If we tried to walk on water we'd sink like ... Peter. I guess we'll keep plodding along on the ground. If we're challenged to proclaim our faith, we'll probably deny it, three times or three times thirty. Rocks.

The world is made by the people who show up for the job. The church, I guess, is built by the rocks who show up for the job.

Fortunately, it's not just us; the rocks are laid; perhaps piled is more accurate I'm not sure we can claim enough coherence to have been 'laid'; on the Rock of God's word and Jesus' ministry. And a big pile of rocks can last...for ages.

Jesus asks us no small thing. But, on *these rocks* He will **build ...his church**.

Because...

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,
Because He has anointed us
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent us to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."