

The region of Caesarea Philippi, the setting for today's gospel story, is at the very northern border of present day Israel. The headwaters of the Jordan River are located here, at the foot of Mount Hermon. It was an important Roman site at the time of Jesus, with temples to Pan and Zeus. I mention this to give some context to this interesting dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter. Imagine Jesus, surrounded by these many depictions of Roman gods, asking his disciples the very pointed question, "Who do you say that I am?" Put another way, "Hey guys, pick your god..." You can see the disciples, a bit startled by the question, figuring out how to answer without committing themselves to a statement that they'll regret later. Only Peter, impetuous Peter, throws caution to the winds and goes for the big answer, the clarifying answer, the hope of hopes. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In reply, Jesus praises Simon and then makes four foundational statements:

1. He changes Simon's name to Peter;
2. He names Peter the rock upon which Jesus will build his Church;
3. He gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, declaring that Peter has ultimate authority to bind and loose, much in the same way a judge can sentence or let go free;
4. He orders the disciples to tell no one that he is the Christ.

Let's look at this a bit more closely. Names are extremely important, aren't they? Dale Carnegie observed that a person's name is the sweetest and most important sound to their ears. New parents spend hours agonizing over the name to give their new baby, don't they? Some look to favorite aunt or uncle names as a way to honor them. Others look for unusual names, or standard names with weird spellings. Others wait until the baby is born and "let the baby tell us what to call him". One thing for certain – the old tradition of naming babies for famous saints has gone completely off the rails. Give me a Michael or a Mary or a Stephen or heaven forbid, a Peter to baptize – I'd probably faint.

But here's the point. God likes to change people's names. Abram becomes Abraham. Jacob becomes Israel. Sarai becomes Sarah. Simon becomes Peter. Why? Two reasons – first, because God, as the Creator, has full authority to do whatever he wants with his creatures, and second, because God is symbolically giving them a new identity. In a sense, they're being reborn. Aha, see the connection? When we baptize a child, we are giving

the child an identity. When we baptize an adult, many choose a new name. When we confirm a teen, a confirmation name can be chosen by the teen and offered to the Bishop. What we're saying is that I'm no longer simply Max or Summer, but I claim the heritage of the apostle John or St. Theresa. It's a beautiful gesture, and reflects a reality. When God calls us to follow, and we say yes, he claims us as his own.

So how were you named? I'll bet there's a story there. Do you know yours? My first name is Peter. I was not named for a relative, nor for St. Peter. It was simply a name my mother liked, and interestingly enough, the name Peter attained its peak of popularity the year I was born. I had two other Peters in my grammar school class of 35. The name Peter has been decreasing in popularity ever since – which simply means that we Peters need to shape up and get more famous. My middle name is John, and this is in honor of my grandfather on my mother's side. When my confirmation rolled around, I chose the name Paul in honor of my favorite cousin – how's that for depth? So my name is Peter John Paul Hodsdon. If you count carefully, I have 4 saints in my name: St. Peter, St. John, St. Paul, and yes, St. John Paul. So there. How could I not be a deacon?

Now back to Peter and Jesus. Jesus renames Peter and then announces what is now available to Peter – namely the keys to the kingdom of heaven. What does this mean? We routinely see cartoons with Peter guarding the gates of heaven, keys in hand, asking some pithy question to see if we should be allowed in. I imagine that this is the image most people have when they are asked, "What comes after death?" This is NOT what Jesus means, however.

Peter is given access to the kingdom of heaven here and now, as are all of us who make the same claim as Peter. The spiritual power of heaven is now available to each of us to be used as needed – by engaging it or disengaging it. How might this work? Let me give you an example. A little over two weeks ago, my daughter in law was hospitalized due to emerging complications with her pregnancy. It is her first pregnancy and the doctors were concerned that she may deliver prematurely. Needless to say, everyone got a bit nervous and concerned. Immediately, my wife and I began to engage the power of heaven. No, we didn't say some magical incantations. We simply asked everyone we knew to pray for her and the baby. We especially asked our deceased relatives to add their voice. My sister passed the prayer request on to a variety of prayer web sites. In less than 4 hours, we have over 200 people praying. This is the rock upon which our Church

is built – the witnesses across the ages coming together to beat back the netherworld. It's now been two weeks. The doctors sent my daughter-in-law home last week – everything is stable. Fear and concern has turned into optimistic hope. The power of heaven.

But now we get to what is perhaps the most puzzling statement of Jesus. Tell no one that I am the Christ! Why would Jesus say this? If I'm Peter, I'm squirming with excitement – wait until I tell the rest of the disciples! No, says Jesus. Why? He's concerned that Peter and the others don't really understand what he's given them. They're each little apprentices in faith, and the full picture of what it means to be a Christian has not yet been revealed to them. No suffering, no crucifixion, and most importantly, no resurrection - yet. There's more to come and Peter and the gang need to stay with Jesus until it is all revealed.

We're the same way, aren't we? We receive a revelation from God through a great retreat, or through a homily, or in quiet prayer and zoom, off we go to change the world. We're a bit like little puppy dogs, wagging our way into the living room, knocking over everyone's drinks in our enthusiasm to spread the good news. But good news, like good fruit, takes time to ripen. Grandparents know this when they watch their kids struggle with the grandkids. The crisis of today is the memory of tomorrow that becomes the funny story retold in five years. The perspective of time cannot be understated in its ability to help us see what's really true.

Consider your identity. What were you like before you understood that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Were you a happy person? What triggered your revelation? Did it come to you all in a flash? Or was it a gradual awakening? If you're like most people, God is still sending reminders that the power of heaven is there for the taking. If you have made that critical admission of faith, the follow up question is crucial - are you bearing fruit? Or, is the fruit still hanging on your tree, not quite ripe enough? It's okay to continue ripening – just realize that the gardener won't wait forever.

Naming Jesus the Son of God, *his* true identity, has the rebound effect of naming *your* true identity in Him. Please discern that carefully by accessing the kingdom of heaven. Pray over it, ask others to help, and see how God responds. Your future is shining bright – just claim it!