



Summer Preaching Series:
Characters of the Bible
Peter



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

August 5, 2018
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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All summer long, our sermon time has been devoted to characters of the Bible, and after making our way through the Old Testament, looking at the stories of people like Moses, Joseph, Ruth and Naomi, last week, we turned the page to the New Testament, as Rev. Amanda spoke about Mary Magdalene.

Today, we continue by reflecting on the life of Simon Peter, one of the most important figures in the New Testament, and of our entire Christian faith, really. Peter is important because he was sort of Jesus' sidekick and foil, always standing there next to Jesus, wherever Jesus went, talking with Jesus and asking Jesus questions. Jesus is the star of the four Gospels, of course, because the stories are all about him, but of all the secondary characters we read about and hear about in the Gospels, there's no one quite like Peter. Peter is mentioned over 200 times throughout the Gospels, while the other eleven disciples are mentioned less than 50 times combined. The disciple John, who is also important and considered the beloved disciple, is only mentioned 18 times.¹ So, clearly, just by the number of times he's mentioned, Peter is a big deal. It is through him that we get a sense of who Jesus was, and what Jesus was all about, and Peter also teaches us what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Many of us are familiar with Peter, since it is not uncommon for our Sunday Gospel reading to include something about him, but I want to review his story anyway: what we know about him from Scripture and what we believe about him from church tradition.

To begin with, Peter was not born with the name Peter, he was born Simon Bar-Jonah, meaning Simon, son of Jonah. Peter was the name given to him later on, by Jesus, as we heard in today's reading: *And, I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.* Peter comes from the Greek word, Petros, meaning, "rock."

Now, Jesus didn't speak Greek. We believe Jesus spoke the language of Aramaic, and in Aramaic, the word Jesus used was, "Cephas." *And, I tell you, you are Cephas, and on this rock I will build my church.*

Peter grew up in the town of Bethsaida, on the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. He had his father, Jonah, and a brother Andrew, who also became a disciple of Jesus. Peter may have had more family, but if he did, Scripture doesn't say anything about them.

Peter, and his brother, and father, all worked as fishermen. That's how they made their living and supported themselves, and so Peter wasn't very well educated or rich. He worked outside, on the water, and therefore, he was probably pretty strong, with hands that were rough and calloused, like anyone who makes a living doing hard, manual labor, day in and day out.

When he came of age, Peter married, and at some point, moved to the town of Capernaum, on the northwestern edge of the Sea of Galilee. There, he had a house and continued working as a fisherman, until one day, while he was down by the shore, Jesus came walking by; and, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." (Matthew 4:19)

¹ Adam Hamilton, Church of the Resurrection, Sermon Series.

For the next three years, which is about the length of Jesus' public ministry, that's exactly what Peter did – he followed Jesus; and, as the first disciple called by Jesus, Peter held a special place among the disciples. He was part of Jesus' inner circle, always by Jesus' side, and that meant Peter got to experience all Jesus' ministry, the high's and the low's, the good times and bad times. Peter heard Jesus preach and teach. He saw the miracles and healing.

Some of the most well known stories that include Peter are: When Jesus walked on water. Peter was there in the boat. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." (Matthew 14:28) Of course, Peter couldn't walk on water like Jesus could. Peter was also there on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. He with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus was betrayed and arrested, and as many are aware, it was Peter who denied knowing Jesus three times on the day that Jesus died.

Through all of this, the picture we get of Peter is man who was passionate, committed, and faithful, but also someone who was impetuous, imperfect, and flawed. Peter wanted desperately to be a good disciple. He wanted to please Jesus; and, make Jesus proud; but, he was always screwing up, saying things he shouldn't have said, doing things he shouldn't have done. One moment, he was completely sure of himself, and the next moment, he was full of doubt. Just when Peter thought he had it all right, Jesus would tell he got it all wrong. In other words, Peter was human, much like you and me, trying his best to follow the way of Jesus but coming up short, more often than not.

It is hard to believe a person like that would be the rock on which Jesus would build his church, but Jesus must have seen something in Peter that others couldn't, potential, or resiliency, maybe. Whatever it was, Jesus was right, because after Jesus' death, Peter became that rock. His strength and courage helped the young church grow. Peter would speak boldly and publicly about his belief in Jesus, and he healed the sick in Christ's name. This often got Peter into trouble with the authorities, just as it had for Jesus before him. Peter was arrested and imprisoned several times, but he didn't really care, because he was continuing Jesus' work and ministry, and thousands of people became followers of Jesus, all because of Peter.

If Peter could do all of that, imagine what we all can do.

As followers of Jesus, we are intended to carry on his work and ministry, just like Peter did. We are the rock on which Christ's church continues to be built, and it is up to us to share Christ's love with the world. Each and every one of us here this morning has a ministry, a calling, something Jesus wants us to do, and more than that, we have committed to bearing witness to God's kingdom, to being a beacon of hope, and justice, and peace.

To hit that point home, I invite you to pick up the *Book of Common Prayer*, which you will find in the pew rack there in front of you. Please pick that book up and turn to page 305. There, at the top, you will find three questions. These questions come from the Baptismal Covenant, promises that parents and godparents make on behalf of children getting baptized, but also promises to which all of us recommit every time we have a baptism. I am going to ask you those three questions, and I invite you all to join in answering.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

Now, tell me: How are you keeping those promises? How are you continuing Jesus work and ministry?

I don't ask you that to make you feel guilty. We don't do guilt here at Grace Church, and God doesn't do guilt either. Plus, I know what you're going to say: "Rev. Andrew, what can I do? I have a job. I have a family. I've already got too much to do. There's just not enough time to do anything else."

And, I get it. I do.

But, Jesus never said following him was going to be easy. It wasn't for Peter, and it won't be for us, either. Following Jesus is hard. It is... but Jesus sees something in you, something others can't see, and something you might not even see in yourself; and, he is inviting you to use your talents, and gifts, and skills to make the world a better place, to bear witness to God's love in the world.

And, we need that love right now. The world needs God's love.

As for what happened to Peter himself, tradition holds that he made his way to Rome, and along with Saint Paul, helped to found the church there. Peter became the first Bishop of Rome, and he continued to live and serve in that city, until sometime in the mid-60's, so about 30-35 years after Jesus' death, which is when the Emperor Nero began persecuting all of the Christians in Rome. Along with many others, Peter fled the city to avoid the persecution, but along the Appian Way, one of the earliest and most important roads in and out of Rome, Peter encountered the risen Christ. "Domine, quo vadis?" Peter asked. "Lord, where are you going?"

To which Jesus replied, "I am coming to be crucified again."

And with that, Peter immediately turned around and walked back into Rome, where shortly thereafter, he, too, was crucified, head down. "I am not worthy to be crucified as my Lord was," he supposedly said.²

To this day, it is believe Peter is buried beneath St. Peter's Basilica, and the Bishop of Rome, more commonly know as the Pope, is seen as Peter's successor.

But, then again, we all are. *And, I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*

Amen.

²Holy Women, Holy Men.