

Sermon – Matthew 16:13-20
David R. Lyle
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“More than Meets the Eye”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Two Mondays ago, Erika and I were sitting on the deck drinking our morning coffee. I was about to head to the airport; she asked me what I was most looking forward to experiencing during my time in the Holy Land. I replied, simply, that I was looking forward to putting visuals to the written words of the gospels, to walking where Jesus walked. I was quick to add, however, that I hoped I didn't become one of those annoying preachers who, upon visiting these ancient holy sites, suddenly feels the need to talk about it in every sermon. So, uh, two Tuesdays ago, I found myself standing in the ruins of Caesarea Maritima, the administrative capital of the Romans occupying Judea. Sorry, I promise not to keep doing this! In addition to the magnificent ruins of a Roman theater and a sprawling hippodrome, we saw a replica of the Pilate Stone found on that site, the best archaeological evidence that exists for demonstrating the existence of Pontius Pilate. The stone is inscribed: “To the divine Augusti Tiberium, Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, has dedicated this.” Aside from archaeological interest, note a few things. First, Pontius Pilate viewed his emperor, Tiberius, as divine, a god to the Roman people. And second, the entire city, with its edifices and inscriptions, was meant to convey one thing: this belongs to Rome and to Caesar; the city bears his name, Caesarea. The people of Judea were occupied, ruled over harshly by a string of emperors who viewed themselves as gods, gods who demanded total obedience and loyalty, gods who insisted that others build cities as monuments to their glory.

2. Our gospel reading today finds us walking with Jesus in another Caesarea – after all, why wouldn't the Roman emperors want more than one city named after them? Jesus knows people have been talking about him, and he's wondering if the disciples have been listening to the whispers swirling around. They've heard some people calling him John the Baptist, while others believe he might be one of the prophets of old, possibly Elijah or Jeremiah. But now Jesus comes to the point. Forget what others are saying; who do *you* say that I am? Simon answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter's profession of faith is loaded with hope, hope that is centered in its claims of who Jesus is and who, therefore, Rome and its Caesars are not. In this town named for Caesar, we behold the One who is Messiah, who will deliver us from oppression. In this Caesarea, named for emperors who believed they were sons of God, we behold this One who is the Son of the living God, not the cheap Roman gods of stone. And in this city of the Caesars, we behold the One whose kingdom is built not upon the rocks of monuments or the stones of subjugation, but upon the rock of faith, which, like Peter's faith, sees within Jesus' humanity the true presence of God-with-us. This kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness, a kingdom against which the gates of Hades, of hell itself, will not prevail. For the Roman occupiers, everything flowed to Caesar, praise and power and money and military might all accrued to him. In Jesus' Kingdom, the opposite is true, as God's power is poured out as love and grace and mercy and peace for this whole world through the crucified Messiah, the Son of the living God.
3. We, like Peter and his friends, look around and see that we still live in a world threatened by the gates of hell, a world in which rulers still seek power for themselves, a world in which we still deal with injustice and oppression. The national conversation about racism and white supremacy, of those who seek to place themselves above others, hit close to home this week. Our friends at Pilgrim Congregation Church in Oak Park were vandalized with

messages of hate, with swastikas and racial slurs. I heard this news a day or two after visiting Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Seeing Nazi flags in a museum is painful enough, but to hear and know that someone has placed the swastika on a house of worship in our community is nauseating. After our time at Yad Vashem, our group, which consisted of Jewish rabbis, African-American Christian pastors, and me, processed the experience. The intersection between those who sought to exterminate the Jewish race and those who sought to subjugate African-Americans in the bonds of chattel slavery was not lost on anyone. It was also clear that while both the Holocaust and American slavery are things of the past, the hate that fueled them lives on. Hell is always trying to burst through its gates and enter our world, but Jesus has established a new kingdom, and hell will not succeed. Hell and its hatred will not win.

4. The German philosopher Max Weber once wrote that the distance between dehumanization and annihilation is very short. Once we stop thinking of other people as human beings, it's the easiest thing in the world to hate them, to stop caring for them, to passively let them suffer or to actively do them harm. It's a short distance between dehumanization and annihilation. Jesus, however, has come to re-humanize us. Jesus, we hear in our reading today, is both Son of Man and Son of God. He is truly human and truly divine. In Jesus, it is not only that the divine has become human; in Jesus we ourselves become human, truly human, for the first time. In the waters of baptism, we have been united with Christ and his humanity – just as Conner will be this morning – and we are empowered now to see others as God sees them for Jesus' sake. We are able to see that no human being can truly be dehumanized, for Jesus's death and resurrection is for them, just as it is for us.
5. The forces of hell are at work in this world, through hate and vandalism and violence. God, however, will not leave us to our own devices. God will not

leave us defenseless. God will not neglect to show love and mercy even to those who heap scorn upon Jesus' gospel of life and forgiveness. God has given us the keys of the kingdom, the power to change this world through forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ and for his sake. This is, of course, only, finally true as Jesus climbs Calvary and is nailed to his cross. It is there, as we behold the forsaken Messiah, that hell and the forces of evil do their worst. And it is there that hate and violence die right along with Jesus; but unlike Jesus, they stay dead. Oh, they're still rattling around. Hate and evil haven't quite accepted their fate. But they are dead, and Jesus lives, and in him we live, too. We live to be transformed for the sake of the new Kingdom, not conformed to the lies of the old kingdom. We live with the cross and its message imprinted upon us, and we need not be silent. Indeed, how can we be quiet? The world needs hope and we know where to find it. Yes, Caesars still demand tribute and seek power. Yes, hate still seeks to dehumanize. Yes, it is happening right in our backyard. But we stand on the rock of faith, trusting in Jesus. Hell and evil couldn't claim him and they won't claim us. In Jesus' name we live. For Jesus' sake we work, binding evil and letting loose forgiveness and life for all people.

6. Near the end of my trip (did I mention I was recently in the Holy Land?), I had the chance to meet and speak with Yossi Klein Halevi, an author and journalist who has written extensively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I happened to have a copy of one of his books with me, so I asked him if he would sign it. Later that night, I opened the book and read the inscription: "To David – with hope, despite everything." Well, that sounds like gospel to me. There is no shortage of problems, no lack of oppression and injustice. And yet, despite everything, we live with hope. Hope in the crucified and risen Lord whose kingdom stands secure, this Son of the living God who has already won the victory, this Jesus Messiah who sends us forth this day to let loose the kingdom of heaven, putting the forces of hell and hatred on the run,

living with life and forgiveness, to the glory of the One who forsake glory for our sake. With hope, despite everything. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.