

Power

August 23, 2026

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

⁸ Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. ¹⁰ Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land." ¹¹ As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. ¹³ So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. ¹⁴ They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: ¹⁶ "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." ¹⁷ Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?" ¹⁹ The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." ²⁰ So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own. ²² Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."...

¹ Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman. ² The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. ³ When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. ⁴ The baby's older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him.

⁵ Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children."

⁷ Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out of the water."

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Human One is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

¹⁵ He said, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Then Jesus replied, "Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you."

¹⁸ I tell you that you are Peter. And I'll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won't be able to stand against it. ¹⁹ I'll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ.



As we begin this series, Lessons in Leadership, we have midwives, a post-partum mother, a pre-teen girl, a carpenter's son, some fishermen. Maybe not exactly the group you'd expect to be heading up a leadership seminar. But each of these people had power and they used their power in ways that brought goodness and stood for life even in the face of oppression. Some acted in faith. Others acted out of compassion. In our Exodus passage, it was a handful of women who chose to defy the powers-that-be and the order to kill innocent babies. In our gospel lesson, Jesus taught and empowered Peter and the other disciples to recognize and speak truth in a society where the powers-that-be, whether the Romans or the religious leaders, sought to silence truth-tellers. Those who held what we think of as traditional power – political, military, or religious – sought to hold onto their power, often to the detriment of others.

There are those who think this kind of thing still happens today. To be honest, many of us have a hard time deciding whether power is good or bad. If pushed, I think that most of us would say power can be both good and bad. On the one hand, we want to empower people to live and act in ways that create a just and flourishing community for all people. On the other hand, we often talk about the powers-that-be in less than flattering terms. For example, we lament that actions and decisions of the powerful when they harm or oppress the powerless.

Power. Too much and it can be dangerous, a poison to self and to others. But if we totally abdicate or refuse to use our power, we can find ourselves tossed about by people or systems that would gladly exploit, abuse, or otherwise take advantage of us. Power itself is not a bad thing. How we use it makes all the difference. As we turn to the stories of Moses in the river and to Jesus' "Who do you say I am?" questions, let us begin with a moment of centering and focusing prayer:

Gracious God, we confess that we too readily conform to the ways of this world, ways that are not your way. Renew our mindfulness of your grace, our attentiveness to your way, so that we might be transformed into your image by your grace, from one degree of glory to another. By the grace of Christ, bless us, that we may hear with glad hearts what you are saying to us today. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and that the meditation of all of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

Please turn with me to Exodus 1 as we begin this time. Right away we learn that there has been a change in leadership. A new Pharaoh rules. And he does not know about Joseph or about any connections to the Israelites. They mean nothing to him personally. Over the years the Israelites have grown in number. They likely outnumber the Egyptians at this point. Pharaoh sees them as a threat. So, Pharaoh put foremen in charge of forced work gangs of Hebrews. But, in verse 12 we read, *"The more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread."* This is not according to Pharaoh's plan. So, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and made their lives miserable, *"forcing them to do all kinds of cruel work."*

And if that were not enough, Pharaoh called in two Hebrew midwives – Shiphrah and Puah – and instructs them when, during birth, *"you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him."*

How would you react if you were one of these midwives? Faced with a ruler who was trying to govern out of fear and by threats, what would you do? It seems so inconceivable to us that a leader would be so afraid of immigrants, that he would recommend drowning them in the river. Imagine if one of our leaders today told us this: whenever you see a Hebrew baby boy, throw him into the river. By appealing to mob action, the Pharaoh was inflaming prejudice and suspicion, stirring up the population with fearmongering and threats. When have we seen something like this recently in our nation? Like it did in Egypt, this oppression of immigrant populations created a social and racial divide in our nation. If left unchecked, the oppression of people groups can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of treating these groups as “less than.” This leads to exploitation and to the normalization of treating others as less than.

Pharaoh wanted to turn the river – a source of life – into a place of death. But his plan did not work. His plan to turn the midwives – the bringers of life – into agents of death failed. The girls that Pharaoh did not deem worthy of being killed at birth were the ones who spared the boys, who stood sentinel over them as they floated in the basket on the river, and who took them in regardless of their father’s cruel edict. Central to this plot were the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. It was these two who feared God and not Pharaoh. It was Shiphrah and Puah who trusted in God’s power and presence more than in Pharaoh’s power and presence.

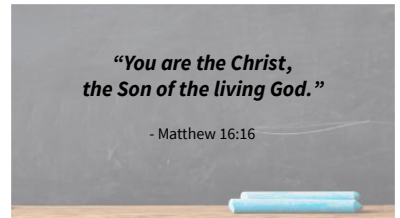
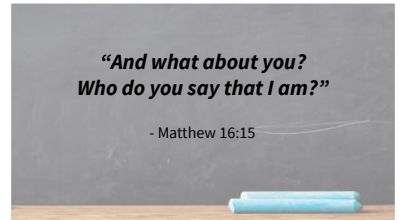
It is true that when we trust in God and do not fear the powers of the world, we often find the way to freedom and to true life. The two midwives were not armed rebels. Their revolt was purely life-giving. Who are the folks today that rebel against oppression and speak out against unjust systems? Who are the people who stand in the path of violence, seeking to protect life and freedom? We saw examples of this recently in our sister state, Minnesota.

In the Exodus story, as the action continues, we see Miriam risking an encounter with an Egyptian princess, willing to ask questions that could lead to trouble for her. She was just a young girl, a pre-teen. She spoke up for her brother, a helpless infant floating in a basket. And then we meet Pharaoh's daughter. She was moved by compassion and was willing to take in and care for one of these baby Hebrew boys. The princess was taking a great risk, going directly against her father's edict. At the end of the passage, we see that she adopted him and named him "*Moses*," because "*I pulled him out of the water*." What a scandal of grace! Again and again, women, people seen as powerless in that society, rose up to exert the power that they had in order to preserve and to safeguard life.

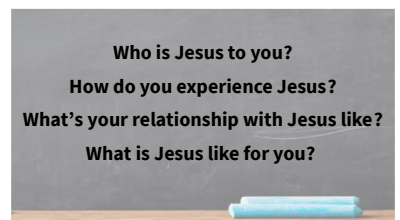
Please turn with me to Matthew 16 as we continue. The chapter begins with the Pharisees and Sadducees asking Jesus for a sign from heaven. They want him to prove who some people think he is. Jesus then warns the disciples to watch out for the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups with great power in Israel were not to be listened to or followed. They were not focused on bringing the kingdom of God to earth.

As we turn to verses 13-20, Jesus turns to the topic of power and identity. These two things are often connected. On a side note, this story is found in three of the four gospels, so it must be an important moment in Jesus' teaching ministry. Jesus begins the lesson with a simple question: "*Who do people say the Human One is?*" He is warming the disciples up with a simple question. It is easy to answer. Rumors about Jesus have been swirling about. The disciples are surely to have heard some of it as they went into town to buy food or as they interacted with family and friends. The answers are varied: "*John the Baptist... Elijah... Jeremiah... some other prophet*." Jesus is really unconcerned with what the general population thinks about him. So he quickly moves to the two questions that matter most.

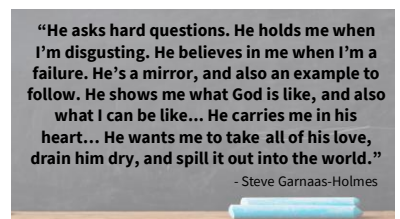
In verse 15 he says to the disciples, almost casually, *“And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”* Jesus wants to know what those who have been the closest to him, the ones who have seen it all, who have heard all the teachings, who do they say Jesus is? It is Peter that answers first. Peter declares, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* He is declaring that Jesus is the one that they have been looking for, that he is the one that Israel has been looking for, that he is the one they need – whether they know it or not. This last part remains true today. Jesus is the one many people need – whether they know it or not.



These two questions about power and identity – seemingly so similar and yet so different. “Who do people say I am?” A question that draws on speculation, gossip, and rumor. Today the answer to this question would also include all the doctrine and teachings of the church. The second question – “Who do you say I am?” – this is a very different question. This question is really getting at these questions: Who is Jesus to you? How do you experience Jesus? What’s your relationship with Jesus like? What is Jesus like for you? In a way, all of these questions are about Jesus’ identity and power – in our lives. It is personal. If we pause for just a second, how would you answer each of these questions?...

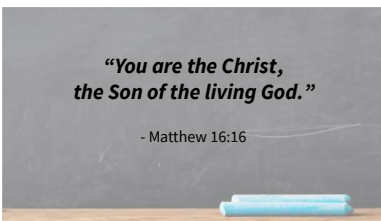


How about this answer that I read in a commentary this week: “He asks hard questions. He holds me when I’m disgusting. He believes in me when I’m a failure. He’s a mirror, and also an example to follow. He shows me what God is like, and also what I can be like... He carries me in his heart... He wants me to take all of his love, drain him dry, and spill it out into the world.”



He carries me in his heart... He wants me to take all of his love, drain him dry, and spill it out into the world.” How is that for an answer about who Jesus is?

I love this answer, especially the last line. Yes, Jesus challenges us at times as the Holy Spirit convicts, leads, and guides us. Yes, Jesus loves us and believes in us even when we are unlovable, even when we are lost in our sin. Yes, we can, at our best, see Jesus as we look in the mirror and as we seek to daily follow his teachings and example. Through these things we come to know God better and we come to see ourselves more and more as created in God’s image. And then that last line! “He wants me to take all of his love, drain him dry, and spill it out into the world.” To drain him dry. That’s like last week’s anointing oil and life-giving dew, running down over the face and beard, flowing down from Mount Hermon. Yes, yes, yes. We are to take in Jesus’ love – all of it – and to let it overflow from our hearts out into the world around us. What a beautiful image!

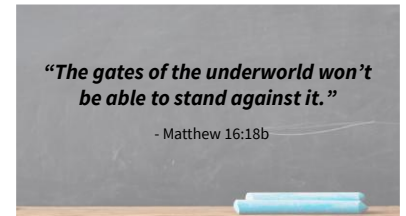


Returning to Simon’s answer, to his declaration of faith, we see that there is something that happens once the declaration is made. Because of his belief, Simon is changed. He is no longer Simon son of Jonah. His identity is now in Christ. So Jesus gives him a new name to go with his new identity: Peter. Through this transformation, Peter now has a new purpose in the community of faith. Peter means “rock.” He will become the rock upon which Jesus will build his church. The same can be true for you and for me when our identity is in Christ.

Once we identify ourselves as someone who belongs to Christ, we give our lives to serve the Lord. While that can look different for all of us, it is a commitment that is foundational.

To follow Jesus is not a when-it-is-convenient or a when-it-is-easy commitment. It is a commitment to follow Jesus with all that we are, all of the time. Because of this, we are like Peter. We are willing for Jesus to shape and change us, to make us new. Like Peter, we are the foundational material of the church. Christ is the builder of the church. We are the materials with which Christ builds.

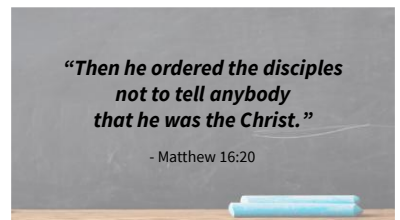
Jesus adds a promise for Peter, and it is a promise that endures to this day. In the second half of verse 18 Jesus says, *“The gates of the underworld won’t be able to stand against it.”* It – the church. It – the community that is foundational to building the kingdom of heaven here on earth. It – all that we are called to be and all that we long to be. The church, the body of Christ, it will survive into eternity. This is a statement of power. There is no power in this world that can stand against the power of Christ. This also means that the attacks of the evil one ultimately will not succeed. So, we do not need to live in fear of any attack. We are, my friends, stronger than we often realize.



Turning to verse 19, Jesus tells Peter, and by extension the church, that he and we hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Talk about power! The key that Jesus hands Peter and us – it is the knowledge of who and what Jesus is. It is our faith in Jesus. It is the ways that we live out Jesus’ teachings and example. When Jesus talks about fastening or loosening on earth and in heaven, he is talking about teaching others about Jesus, about leading others to a saving relationship with Jesus. Through our words and examples, we are to reveal Jesus to the world. We gain knowledge of Jesus through worship and Bible study and through our personal encounters with Christ. In turn, we help others to know our Jesus through the ways that we live out our faith in the world.

We inform, we share, we teach about Jesus – the answer to our prayers, the companion in the dark valleys and on mountaintop adventures, the desire of our hearts, and the fulfiller of our needs. We share Jesus’ power and identity with the world for a purpose: so that others can become a part of the family of God, so that others can find salvation through a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Lastly, verse 20. Here we read, *“Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ.”* Upon a first reading, this is a puzzling order. There was a practical side to this order. In that time of political repression and power over, to announce to Pilate or Herod that the king of the world had arrived, well, it could get Jesus killed. In that time, “Messiah” meant “liberating warrior.” Besides the obvious risk, this was not the kind of king that Jesus was.



There was once a time when we could rely on the authority of scriptures and on the place of the church in our culture to lead people to Christ. In today’s language, there was a time when the church and the Bible had power. But statements like “the Bible says” no longer carries much weight in our world. So maybe when Jesus said, “don’t tell anybody,” he really meant: “show people that I am the Messiah.” People today no longer want to know what we believe. They want to first see how we live. People want to see how faith matters in our lives. They want to see us walk the walk before they hear us talk the talk.



Evangelism today is a lot like that old school game, “Show and Tell.” Our lives reveal who Jesus is as we are the hands and feet of Jesus at work in our communities and in our world.

When we actually show and help others experience the love of Jesus, then we “earn” a place to tell them about Jesus. That opportunity comes as we respond to the inevitable questions: Why are you doing this for me? Why do you care about me when no one else does? How can you be so loving... kind... gracious...? There is great power in our witness, in telling others our Jesus stories, in talking about our encounters with his love and grace and mercy and forgiveness. My friends, in today’s world we do not lead with theology and doctrine. We end with our stories of Jesus, the foundation of our faith. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When has exercising your power on behalf of another helped you to grow in your faith? How can this become a more regular practice for you?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you sometimes hold back, not wanting to risk even though you sense God calling you to action? How might spending time in prayer help with this?
- 3) *Study*. Read Exodus 2:11-25. How is power used well here? Poorly? What lessons can you apply to your life from the example Moses and God provide here?