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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Pentecost 12/Proper 16A
Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.

An iconic line from an iconic play. A sentiment, in context, meant to break down the barriers between two young lovers – a declaration that a name need not be as important as the essence of the individual.

And yet, names often hold great power over our identity, and how we are named – for who or for its meaning – is often profound.

Identity, through naming, is at the heart of our passages from Exodus and Matthew today. In them we glimpse the beginning of the story that will lead to the great exodus of the Israelites out of slavery and oppression, the declarative naming of Jesus as the Messiah, and Simon receiving a new name along with a set of keys.

All of that somehow adds up to offer us an understanding of **our** identity as Christians, which is best summed up in this phrase: *It is not that God's church has a mission, but that God's mission has a church – and we are it.*¹

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¹ The Rev. Kirk Allen Kubicek, Sermons that Work, ECUSA.

It is interesting to notice who is named in the passage from Exodus:

Joseph is named – to show the passage of time through the notation that he is no longer remembered, and the Israelites no longer hold sway, but are instead oppressed.

Places are named – cities that were built during that time, and the river Nile.

The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah are named – perhaps because they are the first case of civil disobedience recorded in the Bible, or maybe because, as those who aid birth, they are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation.²

Moses is named. Even though Pharaoh's daughter correctly deduces that the baby is one of the Hebrew's children, she gives him a name that ties him to the royal family and its influence, following the frequent occurrence of the letters MSS in the names of ancient Pharaohs.³ And yet, as she alludes to in her naming, the name Moses is also tied to action: she drew him out of the water, and his name comes from the root *to draw out* – which points toward what will be the culmination of his call from God, the drawing out of the Israelites from their oppression under Egyptian rule.

And let's notice who is NOT named. Most notably – those with 'power,' that is Pharaoh and even his daughter.

Because identity in this passage is tied to **doing the work of God**.

² Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

³ "Mistaken Identity," by Wayne Brouwer and Schuyler Rhodes from Sermon Suite.

Joseph did the work of God when he used his gift of prophetic dreams to ensure that grain was stored away for use when draught hit the land. Shiphrah and Puah did the work of God when they rebel against Pharaoh's edict to kill Israelite boys. Moses, though only a baby here, is now set to have his feet planted firmly in two worlds – the ruling family and the tribe of the Israelites, which will inform how he will be able to do the work of God when he grows up.

But it's not naming alone that gives us our identity, it is also how we answer God's call, which is seen in our reading from Matthew today.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

It is interesting to note that who people say Jesus is, is determined by what group they come from, perhaps not all that different than if you asked Christians of different denominations today who Jesus is...

And yet, the unifying factor of all those names listed – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah and the prophets – is that they all belong to the transcendent sphere, that is to say, they are dead, though there is some expectation that they may come back as a part of God's plan.

But Jesus is more than that, he has a unique relationship with God not seen before, and those closest to him know it that. And so he said to his disciples, *"But as for you, who do you say that I am?"*

Simon Peter answers for the group, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*”

Now Matthew, along with the other synoptic Gospels, does not develop an explicit doctrine of Jesus as being both fully human and fully divine. And yet Peter’s confession here stands as one of the great Christological affirmations in the Gospels. The words he used – *Messiah, Son of the living God* – give beautiful resonance to what was developing in the hearts and minds of Jesus’ friends and followers as they tried to name his identity: he is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior.

With this recognition and **naming** of Jesus, Jesus in turn gives **identity** to Peter and to the church – both in name and in call.

There is so much we can mine on the play of words that Jesus uses when he gives Simon Peter his new name.

Peter, meaning stone or rock from the Aramaic *Cepha* and Greek *Petros*. Peter may be a common name now, but there are no documented instances of anyone ever being named ‘stone’ or ‘rock’ in Aramaic or Greek prior to Simon. And it’s not clear if Peter is just now being given the name ‘rock’ by Jesus, or whether a previously given nickname is here being given new significance.

But the thing to remember from this naming, however, is that Jesus calls Peter ‘rock’ and says *on this rock I will build my church* not because of Peter’s particular strengths or accomplishments as a disciple, but because of his testimony – his declaration about who Jesus is. In effect he said, “What I have experienced in you, Jesus, is that you are the Messiah, the one that has been sent to us as a gateway into the Kingdom of God.”⁴

It is, therefore, because of this testimony that Peter is given not only a new name, but a new **identity**.

“And I tell you, you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Identity here, like in Exodus, is **tied to doing the work of God**, and it is from this commissioning that Peter and the church are given both this identity and work. Because it’s not just Peter who is called into newness, though his example may serve as a foundation, but it is the people of God – the church – that are called as well.

We are given a new name. The word used for church in this passage, *ekklesia*, is only found in two places in the Gospels. Meaning to be ‘called out,’ it here offers an indication of identity, those who are called to participate in the *missio dei* – that is God’s mission – alongside Jesus.

But with this identity comes that missional work, which in this passage is tied to the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Jin S. Kim, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*.

Now the popular image of Peter with the keys, is that of the doorkeeper of heaven, deciding who in the afterlife is admitted or denied entrance. But the keys that Jesus gave Peter (and the church) are not for later – they are for now.

With these keys, what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

The language of binding and loosing is rabbinic terminology for authoritative teaching using scripture to determine how to make choices about how to live life. So here what we see is Jesus giving Peter (a disciple) and the church (those who are called out) the authority to teach in his name and to make authoritative decisions pertaining to Christian life – that is how to live out God’s mission.

That work is to be done here on earth and now, not later at the gates of heaven.

This brings us back to my original statement about our identity as Christians – *It is not that God’s church has a mission, but that God’s mission has a church* – and we are it.

The keys have been passed down to us. Our identity as Christians, not individually, but as a group, as *ekklesia*, is to do the work of enacting God’s mission of justice, compassion and reconciliation in this world – following in the footsteps of Jesus.

So how do we at St. James’ do this? Do we know? Could others tell us? If we asked our neighbors, who would they say we are? What work do we already do that is a part of the *missio dei*, and where are the areas of need in our world that we can address?

This is not the work of only the Outreach Committee, just like praying isn't just the work of the clergy or the Daughters of the King. This is the work of every ministry we have – from Sunday School to choir, from ushers to coffee hour hosts.

As summer comes to a close and we look forward to Fall Kick-Off Sunday and the start of the program year – we have the opportunity to be intentional about the four-fold nature of the life of faith: pray, learn, give, and act.

Now is a good time to rededicate yourself to your personal prayer practice and to regularly attending corporate prayer on Sundays.

Formation for the whole family is starting up again with Sunday School and Youth Group – as well as our weekly Bible Study, which I think is one of the undiscovered jewels of our community – come and join us to learn more about God and yourself.

As we return to a full range of activities this fall, I invite you to think about the ways in which you can give your time, talent, and treasure here at St. James' – that we might serve the wider world.

And through prayer and discernment, may we together come to act as Jesus' heart and hands in this world.

What would we learn about ourselves if we did this? How would we be a church as a part of God's mission? What would we then be able to tell each other when ask ourselves, "Who are we and what does it mean in the world?" Let's find out.

~ AMEN ~