

John 1:29-42
January 15, 2023

Rock

The next step in the gospel story is the calling of the first disciples. It was a couple of John's disciples that switched allegiances because John told them that Jesus was the Lamb of God. One of them was Andrew, Simon's brother. After spending a day with Jesus, he found his brother, saying, "we have found the Messiah," and brought him to Jesus.

"Messiah," means, "Christ," which means, "Anointed," which means consecrated, set apart for a sacred purpose. To this purpose is attached the idea of salvation, and the idea of salvation is attached to the concept of life . . . Jesus was anointed to bring life and health, wholeness. And he called disciples to be with him, and learn.

Although in Matthew and the other accounts, Simon is not given the nickname, "Peter," until farther into the story, here it happens at the initial meeting between the two, Jesus and Simon. "You shall be called, 'Cephas,'" which means, of course, "Rock."

I am familiar with several attempts to give this name an ironic, if not humorous meaning. It can refer to someone who has, "rocks in their head," or to someone who is dull, or stubborn.

Actually we find Simon/Cephas/Peter/Rock, in the gospels, acting in all of these ways; blockheaded and stubborn, such as when he fell asleep at prayer in the

garden, or when he drew his sword to cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant, or denied even knowing Jesus in courtyard after the arrest, or refused to eat with Gentiles at Antioch after having dined with Cornelius at Caesaria by the Sea. Here all we have is this simple encounter at their first meeting:

"Here is the Messiah," Simon is told by his brother Andrew.

"Your name is Rock," Jesus tells him.

So here we sit all these years later, still speaking and thinking and talking about this incident, and about the gospel story it begins.

The fact that there was a movement like the one led by John the Baptist indicates a dissatisfaction with their status quo, but also an attempt to make things better by doing two things:

- 1 - Criticizing the present order, including the religious and governing authorities, which has become a lucrative industry in present times.

- 2 - Calling for the renewal of faith and an attempt at inner cleansing, offered across the board, to the regular folks as well as to the leaders.

It is into this context that Jesus came; preaching and teaching, healing and feeding, forgiving and liberating, and calling disciples. After all these years the world is still basically untransformed, in need of leadership,

and cleansing, transformation. All of the technological and cultural changes have not had the affect of changing basic human nature. Human beings are all a little like Peter in the block-headed sense of the word.

The point of the Christian faith has always been about humanity, that is, it answers the following question; What does it mean to be a human being? There are, I suppose, other ways to phrase the question. It is clear from the bible that neither the pre-scientific way of understanding the world and thinking about things, nor the post-industrial-revolution modern ways of thinking and understanding, and acting, are the central issue. Let me illustrate by offering two sets of questions that regard our question about humanity:

Should we walk everywhere, or ride horses, trains, drive cars, fly planes?

Should we work in high rise office buildings with cubicles, or in factories out by the industrial park, or on farms, or at home?

Should we use bow and arrow, shotgun, or a domesticated means to acquire the meat we eat and other items we need to survive?

Should we have kings and empires, or presidents and prime ministers, dictatorships or democracies?

All of these are important questions and quite complex, as a matter of fact; but not at the center of

our questions about what it means to be essentially human.

There is another vocabulary we can use to ask questions. We use it all the time. It is the language of relationships;

Should we be loving, kind, and forgiving, or angry, selfish, and afraid?

Should we be willing to use deceit to get what we think we want, or truthfulness? Violence or restraint?

Should we consider the other people in the world friends, or adversaries?

When Jesus took to the highways with his message, he did not go alone but collected a group of people to be around him, an entourage of sorts; he did this for companionship to be sure, but also, to teach them so he could leave behind leaders for the movement that would go by his name after he was gone. While they look rather lost in the gospels, but they did manage to hand off the fledgling faith to the next generation, and it has made its way these two millenniums, down to us.

Among others, Peter stands as an example of faithfulness, of humanness? When we see the *last* encounter between Jesus and Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, after his failure in the garden, and return to Galilee, and fishing, there is a different picture. Peter stands in need of forgiveness and

restoration, which he sought by jumping out of the boat full of fish.

Peter stands as an example of the life of faith. His strength is not that he was always right or that he was always victorious. Sometimes he failed and his failures were big.

He boldly displayed his dedication to Jesus, his complete failure when the chips were down, and his willingness to be reconciled. What does Rock mean?

It could refer to strength, as it is in Matthew, where the image is of a strong and powerful base that can support a structure on top of it, solid, dependable, able to withstand the storm, no matter the storm, even the storm of his own blockheadedness.

Faith, perseverance, humility, restoration, grace, they are all elements of the story, they are the foundations of our lives, and we may think of them as the Rock upon which we stand. In any case, Jesus called disciples from among the people. He calls them still.

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