

Two Questions to Help You Get Ready for Fall

Exodus 3:7-15
Matthew 16:21-28

September 3, 2017
Faith Community

On this Labor Day weekend, as we peer into the deep and dark chasm of a new season, I want to suggest two questions that might be helpful, and one statement for you to build your life on.

Two questions, one statement.

In our New Testament reading, Peter's head must have been spinning. Just before our passage we have Simon, which was his name at the time, pulling off his triumphant proclamation,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”
(Mt. 16.16)

Bull's eye! Jesus is pumped, Simon is proud, and he gets a new name in the process. Now he's Petros, Peter, the “Rock,” and it's on that rock that Jesus will build the very church itself, and just like that we've got a brand new heavy hitter on our hands. A new name means big change. Or, maybe not.

Years ago I had a good friend who was a Roman Catholic priest, and one day he was named a monsignor. I congratulated him and said, “Wow, Father Charlie, that's impressive, a monsignor.” And he smiled and said, “Oh, that's just what they give you instead of a raise.” Well, you can have a corporate, military, education or church related title, and it may not do you a tinker's toot worth of good, but here you've got Petros, the Rock, and you don't mess with a Rock.

We don't know how much time passes between some events in Scripture, but today's passage, which comes immediately after the triumphant name change for Peter, has Jesus telling the disciples what's waiting for him in Jerusalem, and none of it is good. He talks of the coming abuse and even death that would happen before the resurrection. Peter gets himself all worked up and says, “No way is that going to happen to you.” Whereupon, Jesus turns on him, calls him the devil himself and says he's a stumbling block. He had just called him a rock, but now he's a stumbling block.

The Greek word here is skandalon. Sounding like our English word “scandal,” it’s the bait stick of a trap, the thing that triggers the trap when it’s touched. Even brushing up against a skandalon can spring the trap and capture the prey. That’s what Jesus calls Peter here. He goes from Simon to Petros, “The Rock,” to the devil himself. Imagine the craziness rattling around in his head at this point.

Doesn’t it feel like that sometimes? You think you’ve got it down cold, and then you learn how far off the mark you really are. Peter meant well. After all, if he’s a Rock he’d better act like one and come to Jesus’ defense. But this same guy who’d just been given keys to the kingdom itself would’ve ended up keeping Jesus from the very thing for which he had been born. He truly would’ve been a skandalon, a stumbling block, and even a trap.

Now move to the Old Testament. God needs a leader to get his people out from slavery. God knows that leader is Moses, but Moses doesn’t have a clue, and when he finds out, he comes up with every excuse in the book to get out of it. He doesn’t have the skills, the talent, and certainly not the chutzpah to get a job like that done. He even has a bit of a speech impediment, for crying out loud. And you know what? He’s right on all counts. Left to himself, he’s dead in the water, and those slaves would go nowhere under such dubious leadership.

Haven’t you felt like that? It’s exciting to hear of great dreams, but when you learn that you’re the one to turn those dreams into reality, you freeze up and think, “No way.” But listen to this:

Those whom God calls, God equips. Say that with me please:

Those whom God calls, God equips. That’s the statement I told you about earlier.

Please understand this. Build your life on it. If God has called you to something you think is utterly impossible, you’re probably right, just as Moses was. But don’t stop there. Don’t be a skandalon. Don’t get in the way of the very thing God’s called you to be about.

What turns it around for Moses is what can do it for you. He asks questions. There are basically two questions that pull things together, and Moses asks God both of them.

Question number one: “Who am I?” Or more completely,

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? (3.11)

Good question, Moses. Very good question! We’d do well to ask ourselves something like that regularly. Who am I to be doing this? I have no right to stand here as God’s spokesperson for this community. I am out of my league. I have messed up as many times as any of you have, if not more, so, “Who am I?”

That’s why I’m grateful for question number 2: “Who are you?” Or more completely,

Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what do I tell them? (3.13)

Who are you, God?

How that second question is answered shapes how the first one is handled. For that matter, it determines the destiny of the whole thing. Countless lives can be touched. The world can be changed. As a matter of fact, if the answer to the second question leads you to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the answer to the first question becomes clear. That’s because,

Those whom God calls, God equips.

“A Scottish preacher in the last century lost his wife suddenly, and after her death he preached an unusually personal sermon. He admitted that he did not understand this life of ours, but still less could he comprehend how people struggling with loss could abandon their faith. ‘Abandon it for what!’ he said. ‘You who live in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow *must* believe it. We have nothing else.’”¹

The problem: skandalon. What is it for you? What are the traps you need to watch out for? You need to know what they are and then live accordingly.

¹ Philip Yancey, Reaching for the Invisible God: What can we expect to find? (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000) p. 61.

Peter did indeed become that rock. Moses did lead God's people out from slavery. Both were for the same reason:

Those whom God calls, God equips.

Your life depends on this one.