

You Are the Messiah, Sermon August 23, 2026, by Rev. R. Randy Day

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6 and Matthew 16:13-20

Pre-Sermon Comment: A Look in the Rearview Mirror

Last Sunday I talked about the 100th anniversary of the famous Route 66, beginning in Chicago, running down at an angle to St. Louis, and then all the way across several states, ending at the pier in Santa Monica, California.

I was reminded that there is a song called “Route 66” and there was a television series about Route 66. I heard so many stories from a number of you, some of whom are watching here and sent me emails. Unbelievable! Some of you traveled that road more than anybody. Some of you told me about all you read about Steinbeck, who called Route 66 the “Mother Road.” Some of you read Steinbeck in high school. There was lots of conversation about last week, and I’m grateful for all of your stories. They’re great stories.

I’m only mentioning that because Jesus continues on his journey this week

You know, the old Route 66 and the other roads have been largely taken over by the interstate system. The interstate system is great if you’re going somewhere in a hurry, and there is a strategy to the whole thing.

Those who planned it knew the difference between even numbers and odd numbers. The odd numbers go north and south, like Interstate 95 and Interstate 81, while the even ones, Interstate 80 and so forth, go east and west.

If there’s a digit in front of it, like I-195, that means it doesn’t connect to anywhere else; it’s just going off somewhere. If it’s I-295 or I-395, it means it’s going to loop around, usually around a city, and you’ll come right back to where you are. If you forget to get off somewhere, it’s going to help you anyway.

There’s a strategy to all of that.

And I hope some of you will continue your road trips, because we’re only halfway through August and there’s more fun to be had. Thank you for all of your stories.

Sermon

So here we have the story that Paul just read to us, and we’re halfway through the Gospel of Matthew. I’ve been saying a number of things about Matthew each and every week, primarily that he was relating to the Jewish community, not the Gentile community, as Saint Paul did a bit later and for a long, long time.

So we have this passage this morning. It’s the middle of Matthew. It’s the first time that the term “Messiah” has been used. The first time. It’s also the first time that Simon Peter becomes Peter in the narrative—a big name change, associated with the rock. It’s the first time that *ecclesia* is mentioned, a Greek word translated into English as “church.” That’s us—the church. It is the very first time that it’s mentioned in the Gospels.

It all took place in Caesarea Philippi.

Now, it's a very significant turning point for many, many reasons, and there are so many places I could go in the commentaries I read. But let me just start out by saying, well, Peter's confession—it's the huge confession, right?

Jesus says, "What are other people saying about me?" (Somebody said—I read in one commentary—"That's the question no pastor wants to hear." What are people saying about me? Let's don't do a survey or anything wild like that.)

But Jesus is asking them, and they're giving some answers. Then he presses them, and Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

So this is a huge confession. It underscores the very importance of this place in the Gospel, this geographic place, and how Jesus is revealing himself to the others.

And after this great confession and acknowledgment, what does Jesus do at the end of the text?

He tells him very sternly, "Don't tell anyone else. Don't tell anyone else."

Now, speaking of travel, Caesarea Philippi is located at the foothills of Mount Hermon. It's way north of what we would see as present-day Israel and Palestine. It's about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, which is nothing in a car. But remember, these guys are walking, so they've gone on up there.

It was formerly known as Paneas. It's a mountainous area full of springs, and these springs feed into really the beginning of the Jordan River. It's also a place of many caves, and it has a legendary history as a place of pagan worship.

So I drilled down a bit on that.

It was also a very notable Hellenistic and Roman administrative capital. It had grown and become a larger city. But way before Herod Philip, who was the son of Herod the Great, came along and built it into more of a modern city, it was known as the Grotto of Pan—P-A-N, Pan.

That's where the pagan rites took place.

Pan was a god among many deities, and Pan was the deity of the shepherds. We know from our own Gospel readings all the stories Jesus told about shepherds. There were a lot of sheep around, probably some goats, too. There was a need for shepherds, and so in that context of what we call pagan religion, they prayed to this deity.

I also found out that there are caves around there. It's a mountainous area, and there happens to be one really big cave.

Some of you have gone into caves, right? Over in Missouri and different places, you know. If you're claustrophobic, you don't want to go. But going into a cave is something most of us have done.

Well, this is a really big cave, and the local folklore was that this cave was the entrance to the underworld.

So we have this term, "the gates of Hades." What's he talking about?

He's talking about the big cave the pagans worship, and he's saying, "I have the authority over heaven and earth, and I hold the keys to hell." In other words, I control who is going to go in or out of that underworld.

So Jesus is playing on the geography. He's tapping into the geography.

And why did he ask this question of his disciples? "Who do people say that I am?"

Why did he choose to do it here?

You stop and think about it. It's pretty powerful.

He went into the most hostile territory. He went to the place where pagan deities were being worshiped. He could have done this in Jerusalem. He could have done it in the temple, as he did some of the other things he did. But he chose to do it in this place.

So the great confession, "You are the Messiah," takes place around all of these other shrines.

There are all kinds of modern excavations. Some of you maybe have been there, or your grandkids have, and they have found all kinds of inscriptions from temples and things dating way back to a couple hundred years before Jesus and during Jesus' time. It gives credibility to the reading of this text.

Okay, so now we'll move beyond the gates of Hades, and we'll come again to Peter's confession.

It was a very, very powerful confession to say, "You are the Messiah. I believe in you, and you have revealed yourself to us. There is a connection to the divine."

So we're halfway through the Gospel. Remember, halfway through the story, these disciples have been with Jesus day in and day out for quite some time.

If his ministry was about three years, we could say, "Well, this is about a year and a half into it." That's a lot of camping out. That's a lot of staying in different villages, right? You're eating your meals together, sleeping, walking—you're doing it all. They've been with Jesus quite a while.

Some of you have camped across the United States. You've told me you've camped across the United States, so you've been camping out, kind of traveling by the road with someone for a year and a half. You know him pretty well as a human being.

But here, the divine part is being revealed, and Peter seems to grasp it.

Not to leave out the others—most commentaries say they were all grasping it—but Peter is the spokesperson in the narrative.

So they're grasping that there's something divine about this person, Jesus, with whom we've been traveling for the last almost two years.

The question would be, on this August Sunday morning: How do we connect to the divine?

Some of the prayers this morning, I thought, were more powerful maybe than usual.

How are we connecting to the divine?

Sometimes it happens during a tragedy. Sometimes it happens when you're getting back test results after a car accident. All kinds of things will trigger these questions. And sometimes you're just walking by the beach, picking up shells, not really having a theological discussion with yourself or God or anyone else, and you start thinking, "What's my connection to the divine?"

I'll help us out a little bit.

I turned to the famous journal *The Christian Century* this week, and there was one article in there written by a Korean woman named Jessica Lee. The opening sentence just absolutely stopped me in my tracks.

The title is "Augustine Gave Me a Language for Staying Alive," and Jessica begins, "I am my neurodiversity, I'm a neurodivergent disabled woman, and for most of my life, I considered suicide." And then she turned to the *Confessions* of Augustine.

You guys remember Augustine, right?

We don't do a lot of church history here, but Augustine, in the late fourth century, in the late 300s A.D., lived in a city in northeastern Algeria. It's still there, although it has been renamed. That's where he began writing the *Confessions*.

There are how many books? Sixteen of them, I think it is. Each one stands by itself, and they were meant to be read out loud.

His conversion to Christianity happened because a very close friend of his died, and he was just devastated emotionally—and I guess spiritually, too. Devastated. So he started searching. He was converted, and in his *Confessions*, he confesses to all the bad things he did as a young person, and there were a lot of them.

So we read this stuff in the seminary. It goes on and on. I mean, he had a lot to confess to, right?

So the conversion was a big thing. It was really a big thing. A lot of students, theological students, and others in philosophy courses turned to the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Oh, by the way, it's called Hippo. It's not named after hippopotamus, which we find, of course, in Africa. Hippo is an old Punic word that came from the Assyrians, and it means harbor. It's a simple word—it means a city on a harbor.

(But "Hippo," I know, is going to conjure up ideas.

(Some of you have safaris on your bucket list. You told me. Now, before you sign up, before you go on a safari, I want you to come and see me for a free consultation. A lot of people say, "Well, I've got to be careful of the lions." Well, hippos kill more people than lions. Some people say hippos kill more human beings than any other animal, which is totally false.

(Do you know the animal that kills the most human beings?

(Mosquitoes. The mosquito kills hundreds of thousands of humans per year by way of malaria, which I've spent a lot of time fighting in Africa.

(The hippo kills about 500 human beings a year—small compared to hundreds of thousands. But the hippo gets the prize of being the large land-based animal that kills the most human beings.

(I've seen them in the water. They're in water streams and ponds on safari. We were in a little boat. You saw three or four of them together, and they're taking pictures, and we went on down the river.

(Then there's one by himself.

(I know it's a male because the guide said, "That's a lone male hippo."

Well, someone asked him why he was by himself.

(He said, "Well, he might have been thrown out of the group, or basically he's out looking for a spouse, a mate."

(Otherwise, people were taking pictures again, and I'm just thinking, "I hope this dude doesn't think our tourist boat is a possible mate! That would be the end of us."

(So be careful of the hippos if you go on a safari.)

But back to the *Confessions* of the Bishop of Hippo, Augustine.

She says, "When I first encountered the fifth-century theologian Augustine, it was not love at first sight."

"What is it to live?" he asked.

That grabbed her attention.

"What is it to live, or rather, what is it to live well?"

"I found Augustine an invitation into exploring what the true meaning of life could be."

For Augustine, the good is not a containable object. Often we think the good thing is something we can get ahold of. We can get our hands around it. We either buy it or borrow it, or somebody is willing to give it to us. We think of objects.

She said, "No, not that at all."

It is something intelligible and practical, not like a written document or a thing you put your hands around. Rather, it is the very definition of creation itself.

Creation.

Everything created by God is good because God is good, and that is what we seek.

She goes on to say that evil, for Augustine—think of the cave of the pagans, the underground—is not an equal, opposing force to good. Evil is defined by the absence of the good.

The sheer horror of loss and the severity of grief leads Augustine to search for a love that, once acquired, will consume the fear that he has inside him.

So losing that dear friend was the catalyst through which he found God, related to God, found beauty in all of creation, and lived the rest of his life.

He wrote these *Confessions* over about three years. He lived another forty years. He wrote *The City of God* and all kinds of other things.

Very, very powerful.

One of the great figures of the early church found God. He found this relationship that was able, in a sense, to consume him—to open his eyes to the beauty of creation, to the beauty of life itself.

All because a relationship was established with God.

That is the very reason Jesus came in the first place, the very reason Jesus walked around with these guys for three years, and the very reason that, in today's passage, he revealed himself to them as the Messiah.

So I hope you will find a beautiful life that God is inviting you into.

I know God is inviting you to relationships. Sometimes it's a matter of hearing it.

Are we ready?

So perhaps you're going to hear it for the first time in a long time. Perhaps you're here for your weekly renewal. Perhaps you're going to hear it for the first time ever.

But God is inviting you into a relationship where you will not be ruled by fear, but you will be filled with love each and every day.

Amen.