

Ordinary A 21 August 23, 2026 Greenwich

Summer is fleeting, vacation days are dwindling, and you've heard that gospel lots of times. At least imaginatively, you might already be out the door!

But this oh-so-familiar gospel is the crucial fourth and final turning point for Jesus on His way to Jerusalem.

So let me invite you to shake off August ennui and listen to the gospel with fresh ears.

It all starts in the obscurity of Nazareth. After the angels, the star and the Magi, the massacre of the children and the escape to Egypt, the child called "Son of God" and his family went home to that little backwater town of a few 100 observant Jews.

And for the next thirty years, nothing happened.

But then came a voice, crying "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

The first turning point: Jesus is baptized at the Jordan; and the Spirit drives him into the wilderness, readies him to confront the Evil One, then leads him into the start of his public ministry.

Around the campfire, in the workshop, in the town square, the builder from Nazareth begins to speak of God as no one before had.

He teaches the people that God loves sinners, and the pious, religiously observant people of Nazareth scratched their heads.

He lays his hands on a leper, and they shiver in horror and disgust.

He drives out evil spirits, and the locals feel both awe and suspicion.

In the synagogue, he reads from the prophet Isaiah but omits their favorite passage.

“No,” says Jesus, what is coming is not the day of God's wrath to destroy the pagans, but the year of God's favor. And the good people of Nazareth can't take any more of this. They rise up and expel him.

And just then, John is arrested. The second turning point.

Jesus and a ragtag band of part-time disciples decamp to Capernaum.

There he heals the sick and feeds the multitudes. He sits at table with sinners and proclaims good news to the poor.

With John the Baptist under a death sentence, Jesus now becomes the central focus of the people's expectations.

“Is he Moses? Is he Elijah?”

Then the sword falls upon John's neck. And Herod, who has been obsessed with John, now turns his attention to the new threat. Because of the crowds he draws, like John, now Jesus has become dangerous. Like John, now Jesus must die.

The third turning point.

Suddenly the disciples have their world turned upside down.

Those heady days of miracles and besting the Pharisees in debate are over.

Doors once opened to the disciples are slammed shut; it's dangerous to be a Jesus follower.

To escape Herod, they withdraw into the area around Caesarea Philippi.

The place is dominated by two geographical features: Mount Hermon, an enormous snow-capped “rock” that rises ninety-four hundred feet from the plains; and the Jordan River, flowing out from under Mount Hermon.

At the base of the mountain are eight grottos and a shrine to Pluto, god of the underworld. The shrine is said to be the entrance to his realm: the gates of hell.

Jesus hurries to complete the training of the Twelve, to prepare them for the final journey, to Jerusalem and the Passover.

He opens their minds to the Scriptures.

And he recalls for them all his teachings, about the first being last and servant of all, and God's desire for mercy, not sacrifice.

He leads them in prayer, teaching them to call upon God as Abba.

And one day, he takes a chance on them. The teacher gives the students a pop quiz.

“Do you get it yet? Who do you say that I am?”

And Simon takes a chance on Jesus. It's as risky a dare as when he had stepped out of the boat in the storm, because he is stepping out of all the received wisdom about God and the Messiah. "You are the Anointed One, the Son of God."

"Blessed are you. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Heavenly Father has."

Then, standing beneath that rock of Mount Hermon, at the source of the living waters of the Jordan River, Jesus declares, "Peter, you are rock, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

Jesus confers on Peter the strength and authority he will need to be a servant leader of the Church.

The fourth turning point.

With Peter's confession, Jesus can set out for Jerusalem and the Cross.

The disciples are still not ready for the great test. Simon, the "Rock" will shortly be "the stumbling block" and the tempter, for trying to spare Christ from suffering.

Even after the disciples witnessed the Transfiguration, they will still vie for first place;

they will still argue about who is the greatest among them;

they will continue to be preoccupied with having places of honor at his side.

They confess him as Messiah, but do not really understand what that will mean for Jesus, what that will mean for them.

Not until the Resurrection will they really “get it.”

Not until Pentecost will they really become “Church,” the community gathered to serve in the name of Jesus, alive in His Spirit.

But that confession---“You are the Christ, Son of the living God”---commits them to the journey with Jesus.

They could stay there at Caesarea Philippi, in safety, reminiscing about “The good old days” at Capernaum. But you can't change the world from a place of safety. Jesus will fulfill the plan of salvation ordained by the mysterious God, who isn't at all like what they imagined.

Jesus will deliberately provoke the conflict with the powers of evil. He will begin the *Via Dolorosa* when he sets his face towards Jerusalem.

On this August weekend, the Gospel finds us disciples at different places on our own journeys with Rabbi Jesus.

Some of us are still back in Nazareth; we are still just “part-time students,” not yet fully committed to him.

Some are with him in Capernaum, as it were, and being filled with Him fills us with delight and wonder.

Some have had our world turned upside down, and we are disoriented and frightened.

Some call him Lord but shrink back from the cost of that confession.

Some of us are at Calvary with him, bearing the marks of his, and our own, Passion.

But to all of us who confess him as Messiah and Son of God, he offers three words of hope:

First, not flesh and blood but his Heavenly Father has taught us to call Jesus the Christ; our faith, which gathers us here, is itself a gift from God.

Second, at this place of Sabbath rest on the journey, we receive what we need to carry on, to Jerusalem and the cross and glory;

for here he says to us what he said to his first disciples at that final Passover meal: “This is My Body, this is My Blood, of the new and eternal Covenant.”

Third, no matter what, the final victory belongs to the Lord and to all who belong to Him. Nothing, not evil, not death, not the jaws of hell, can finally prevail against God and God's people.

We ask the intercession of Simon Peter, and all the faithful ones who have followed Jesus ever since, to strengthen and encourage us to step out of our fears and our two small concepts of God, and of Jesus, and of ourselves; and to step on to the road with Jesus, the way to Jerusalem and the Cross and the Kingdom.

For we too are blessed. We are part of that servant Church, built on that first risky confession of Peter.

And when we are at the side of Christ, not even the jaws of hell can prevail.

And the people of God said, Amen.



Children's liturgy version of the homily FOR August 23, 2026 Ordinary A 21

(need two sets of badges and a set of markers; one set is blank, the other says "beloved child of God;" at start, ask parents to accompany kids to the front, hand them an i.d. badge and ask them to write their kid's first name on their kid; while they do that, I continue)

Some of you have heard of the actor The Rock, whose real name is Dwayne Johnson.

Well, the first one to get the name Rock was Simon Peter/Rocky Jesus gives him that new name, when Simon gives Jesus the new title, Christ and Son of God.

Your parents did to you what Jesus did for Simon; they gave you your name, and that is the name by which you will be known by God before his throne forever;

And every time you make the sign of the Cross, you do what Simon Peter did, you call Jesus by a title, the Son of God, the Christ.

AND, when you were baptized, God did for you what Jesus did for Peter; God bestowed on you a new name, and a new title; God gave you the name and the title "beloved child of God," and brother or sister of Jesus.

(with help of others, I put new id sticker on each kid)

So Jesus got a new title, Christ and Son of God; Simon got a new name, Peter, Rock.

And at your baptism you got both: a new name, the one on the badge your parents put on you; and a new title, beloved child of God, brother or sister to God's son Jesus, a title God gave you when your parents presented you for baptism.

Parents and adults, we don't have name badges for you, but the same two gifts were given you in baptism: your name, by which all will know you before the throne of God forever; and a new title: you are God's beloved child, and so beloved brother or sister of Jesus.

When you are home with your children, tell them why you had them baptized, why you gave them their particular name, and what it means, to you, to be beloved child of God and brother or sister of Jesus.