It’s important to know where we are.

Right now I’m preaching in an empty Sanctuary, save for me and David Hammons who is behind the camera – shout out to him, by the way – we are able to worship today because he didn’t run for the hills when 2020 happened and turned his one job into three.

Where are we? Where are you? Maybe at home? Maybe listening in on the radio while you drive for grocery pickup or to see someone in your pandemic pod. By the time we’re all participating in this worship service, I’ll be at home splitting my attention between playing blocks with my toddler and worshiping with all of you over the internet.

Where are we? We’re all over the metroplex and the United States; a few of us are tuned in from overseas. Politically, we are in an election year in the U.S. We are experiencing a mass awakening to racial and economic injustices in our country and a movement to create change for the good. We are riding the waves of a deadly pandemic, sheltering in place, working from home or jobless, crowded or more alone then we have ever been.

And we are trying to hold ourselves open for a second to hear a word of hope from a first century story about a wild rabbi and his band of disciples.

It’s important to know where we are and what we are bringing with us as we approach this story. It might help us catch what the Lord is wanting to bring to us, wherever we are. Place has a gospel to tell too.

The story we just heard from Matthew’s gospel begins in a scandalous place. Did you catch that? I didn’t. That particular detail of place never snagged my attention either. Not until I was actually standing in Caesarea Philippi back in 2018 looking at a whole mess of rock.

About twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee, in the middle of what felt like absolute nowhere,
there is a huge outcrop of red stone. It stands like a small mountain, peaking four or so stories high with trees and shrubs softening the hard edges of stone. It didn’t take long for that feeling of being “nowhere” to dissipate in a setting of such simple splendor.

This is not a forgotten place. When you get close to the rock, you can see little shelves carved here and there, sized just right for an honorary statue or gift offerings for a deity. The more you look, the more you realize that you are standing in the ruins of temples and other ritual spaces. Get even closer and you find a deep place, a grotto that I didn’t want to step too far into, feeling like the rock might just keep coming around and swallow me whole.

In the first century and before, Caesarea Philippi was Pan’s place, a place where people sought the half-man, half-goat god of the wilds and wilderness, shepherds and sheep, sex and fertility. He was the bringer of parties and, most importantly, a refuge for outcasts.

Caesarea Philippi reflects that rambunctious-yet-solitary spirit in its beauty and seclusion. But it is also complicated. It’s a complicated place.

Yes, there’s the splendor. There’s the honor of touching a place carved out by multitudes of untouchables finding a place of their own. But there is also the seemingly innocent Roman boardgame carved into flat stone belying imperial occupation, a game for soldiers passing the time of day. Worse yet, there’s the horrific cache of infant bones found in the sewage system, likely the sons of ritual prostitutes. The hair still stands on the back of my neck.

Caesarea Philippi is a place that has held the harshest and most sorrowful aspects of the human condition. It represents the whole swath of humanity who’ve been ostracized, polarized, pushed out and preyed upon. It was a refuge and a prison, depending on how you looked at it. It was also decidedly pagan and gentile.

And it is there that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

It’s not hard to imagine the disciples sitting there, maybe keeping an extra tight clutch on their belongings, eyes darting
back and forth across the diverse crowd. They had to be nervous, caught between a rock and a hard place. Faced with evidence of the worst humanity could do to one another while wrestling their own squeamish prejudices in front of Jesus.

I wonder how many times we ourselves have been in such a place. It could be that we have not been there too often; maybe we have, for better or worse, had a pretty easy life, unmarred by disenfranchisement or marginalization.

On the other hand, perhaps the state of the world of late has made the pain and suffering of all creation all we can see. It seems insurmountable. What can be done? We’ve thrown our hands up in the air.

In the story, though, Simon says all that he can, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And it is on that proclamation, that truth-telling, that dogged declaration that Jesus says he will build his church. Jesus gets all excited and delights over his friend – “My brother, YOU GET IT! You have seen God!”

Jesus says that flesh and blood did not reveal his identity to Simon-about-to-be-called-Peter. God did.

Now, this is Jesus we’re talking about. The incarnate, this God-Man is anything but anti-flesh. Flesh and blood are not bad, but they are not everything. There is a Being beyond us and now comes to us. Simon sees it. Simon sees it among the rocks of Caesarea Philippi, rubbing shoulders with the absolute least of these.

The Son of the living God.

This Son is the only one who can do anything about the world we are living in. Jesus is the Messiah, the one anointed to deliver the people. And yet we see Jesus turn right around and pull Simon into the mix.

With his feet on the rocks of Caesarea Philippi, refuge of outcasts and freaks, Jesus calls Simon Peter to his greatest work yet. On this declaration of faith, Jesus says he will build a new thing, a thing called out of the rock to be a rock for all people. Jesus renames Simon Peter – Petros, Pebble – and says that the church begins with him.
The church begins right here.

Some folks say this gives Simon Peter a certain credence. Primacy or “being first” has been for a long time in Western culture a determinant of eminence. But if we remember where we are, maybe we catch a glimpse of what Jesus was really saying.

They stood on the rocks of the sinners and sorrowful. They stood on the rocks belonging to those who did not belong. That is where Jesus decides to build the church.

A prophet of old, Isaiah, we heard it earlier in the service: “Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.”

Jesus grounds the church forever with her destiny in this moment. We are meant for the lost, the put out, the ones looking for refuge and home.

The church is not a place for determining primacy or credence. It is the place where we proclaim the saving power of the Messiah, the Son of the living God, to those at rock bottom.

We proclaim the one who was there when the rocks were formed, when the grotto was hewn. Before the layers of rights and wrongs and wild complications, Jesus was and is and is now as we peer down at the hard and complicated place under our own feet.

This is still our call, beloveds.

The church is shifting and changing as the world’s needs continue to shift and change. This has always been the case, only now we are in a time where we can’t help but notice.

After all, where are we? We’re worshiping over the internet, separated from one another, social distancing, bearing up alone. Could anything feel harsher? Could anything feel harder?

Perhaps in such a time as this, faith is what makes the difference between feeling like we’ve hit rock bottom and noticing that our feet have finally found Solid Rock. Jesus is still found in the hard and the harsh. Jesus is the foundation under our feet. He is here in this place.
Perhaps in such a time as this, we see the Son of the living God in our midst.

Perhaps in such a time as this, we call out to him, we proclaim him, we seek his lordship and transformation like never before.

Perhaps we’ll know a power even the gates of hell cannot withstand.

And you know that is what we need.

Like the first church, we need a power unshakable in the face of Occupation, Exploitation, Marginalization.

We need a power unshakable in the face of Fear, Unknowing, Bigotry, and Hatred.

We need a Power unshakable in the face of non-stop news cycles and press briefings, of endless and essential causes –

The world is shaking all around us.

There’s reason to clutch at our belongings and scan the crowds. We are standing in a place of sin and sorrow.

But, church, let us notice again today with whom we are standing.

Jesus, Messiah, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Beloveds, take heart. Wherever we are, wherever we go, there is no place untouched or untouchable for the Incarnate Son of the Living God. Let us plant our feet firmly, find our bearings. Let’s start thinking about putting our bags down and setting up camp for a while amidst the hard and harsh.

Jesus is already here.

Amen.