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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16: 15).

Peter’s triumph at Caesarea Philippi is short-lived. In one moment he correctly identifies Jesus as the Christ and is called the “rock” on which the church will be built. In the next moment Jesus rebukes him: “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” In the space of 10 verses in Matthew, Chapter 16, the church grounds itself in the authority of Peter as its first pope and then acknowledges his utter human fallibility.

There is some purpose in this shocking contrast. Unlike most institutional histories, the church has not rested its credibility on human virtue or brilliance. Most official histories tout their founders and leaders as models of virtue and wisdom. Official portraits and statues depict kings and presidents in heroic poses.

St. Peter is a lesson in failure, a braggart turned coward who was lifted up by mercy to preach mercy. Jesus seems to have chosen him to reassure sinners of the absolute power of forgiveness. There is no failure that cannot lead to grace, no shame that cannot be refashioned into compassion for others who also feel lost and broken.

Today’s first reading from Numbers 20 gives us ample reference to the weakness of Moses, God’s chosen guide for his people during their long desert sojourn. Their lack of faith in Providence tests Moses’ confidence in God’s crisis management in the wilderness. The people were brought to near starvation before manna and quail arrived. The people and their livestock are dying of thirst, and the people’s loud

wailing is driving Moses over the edge.

God instructs him to gather the community at Meribah, and there to strike the rock with his staff. Water rushes out, but it is a rebuke for their lack of faith. For his part, Moses is denied the triumph of leading Israel into the Promised Land. Yet in the larger story of salvation, Moses' real glory will lie in his self-immolating encounters and dialogues with God that produced the Law and the Covenant. When Israel became a kingdom, the Mosaic code served as a constant reminder that because they were rescued from slavery and lifted up, they must be welcoming and compassionate to others in the same way.

Matthew, so alert to every figure and prophecy fulfilled by Jesus, surely saw the connection to Peter, the rock struck to issue a flood of tears that baptized him and the followers of Jesus after the crucifixion. Out of human sin and failure is revealed the gift of unconditional love. This is the real foundation of the church.

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