

**Jesus Believes in You: Simon Becomes Peter**  
Kevin Saxton, Brewster Baptist Church, March 19, 2006

The last several weeks we've been going through a series titled "When God Changes Your Name," and we've been looking at some biblical figures who had their names changed as a result of their encounter with God. We looked at Abraham and God's faithfulness to him and his family. We looked at Jacob and how God transformed him and changed his name through struggle. Today, we're going to take a look at one of Jesus' disciples, Simon, who has his name changed by Jesus in Matthew 16.

In order to understand Peter's story, we have to first start a little earlier, so we're going to begin in Matthew 4. As you're turning there in your bible, let's do a little background work so we can grasp the context of the story. In the first century world of Jesus, the most esteemed person in a Jewish community was a rabbi or teacher. Everyone wanted their child to grow up and become a rabbi, because the rabbi was the one who taught the Jewish traditions and lived and taught others how to live the Torah (Jewish law).

To this goal children would go to school to learn and memorize the law and prophets, finishing when they reached 14-15 years of age. If a student was bright, the student would seek out a rabbi of whom they wanted to be a disciple, and the rabbi would quiz them with questions from the Torah, and based on their answers to the rabbi's questions, the rabbi would decide whether or not the student could become like him and live out his teaching. If he didn't think the student could do it, he would say, I'm sorry, I don't think you can be like me, go home and learn the family trade or business. If the rabbi thought that the student had "it" and could become like him and live out his teaching, he would invite the student to become his disciple by saying "Come follow me."

With this in mind let's begin to take a look at Peter. When we first meet him in Matthew 4, he is known as Simon . . .

*“One day as Jesus was walking along the shore beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers--Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew--fishing with a net, for they were commercial fishermen. Jesus called out to them, “Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and went with him.”<sup>1</sup>*

So when Jesus meets Peter, what’s he doing? He’s fishing. What does this tell us about Peter? Maybe he’d tried to sign on with a rabbi, only to be told “I’m sorry, you don’t have what it takes.” Maybe he hadn’t even tried. Maybe he believed he wasn’t smart enough, that he didn’t know the Torah like the kid who sat next to him. For whatever reason, Peter apparently to this point hasn’t been considered disciple material, and so he’s home, working the family business with his brother Andrew, who is, quite literally, in the same boat.

But then this rabbi Jesus comes along the shore one day, and says to Peter and Andrew, “Come follow me.” Jesus meets these two young men who apparently hadn’t been deemed worthy or capable by other rabbis, they aren’t following a dream, they’re fishing, they’ve resigned themselves to this role. Into their lives Jesus steps in and invites them, “Hey, come follow me. I believe that you can be like me.” A rabbi believes that they can be like him! A rabbi believes that they can do it! A rabbi believes that they have what it takes to live and teach the law! Is it any wonder that Peter and Andrew leave their nets at once? Jesus is inviting them to become everything that they have dreamed, when they had no reason or expectation to think that it could happen.

If you ever have had someone tell you that they believed in you, you know it’s a powerful thing. It can be life-changing. It certainly is life-giving to be told that someone sees potential in us that we might not be sure that we see in ourselves. When others (parents, coaches, friends, family) believe in us, it can push us out to places or things we wanted to go or try out but weren’t sure that we could actually do it.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:18-20

One of my favorite things about working with students (and people in general) is helping them to discover that their potential is far greater than they probably imagine. This is why we call our High School Ministry “Kinetic Explosion,” God has gifted each of us with potential, and our task with God’s help is to realize that potential and turn it into motion. Seeing students discover that they are capable of more than they thought they were, is an amazing thing. Simply telling someone else that we believe in them, that we believe that they can do it, has the power to help them to free children, students, and adults from a lack of faith in what God can do in and through them. Unfortunately, all too often the messages our children and students (and most adults for that matter), is you can’t do it. You aren’t smart enough, you aren’t good enough, it’s just a silly dream, it’s too late for you to change.

But this isn’t what God tell us. Jesus doesn’t simply invite Peter and Andrew to become his disciple, he invites each and everyone of us to follow him, because he believes that through his power and grace, we can become like him. Jesus believes in us. He believes in you. He believes in me. No matter who we are, no matter what we’ve done, no matter what we think of ourselves, Jesus calls us to follow him, because he believes that we can be like him.

As the story continues through the gospels, Jesus continues to invite people to follow him: a couple more fishermen, a tax collector, a political activist, and others, none of them particularly “qualified” in the eyes of the world around them. Jesus teaches them and they live together and seek to become like Jesus. And then in Matthew 10, Jesus gives them an opportunity to be like him and teach, heal, and cast out demons as he sends them out to proclaim the kingdom.

Because Jesus believes they can be like him, he sends them out for a bit to do it, to be like him, to do the things he is doing, to give them the experience that they can really do it. The disciples return, and Jesus continues to heal and to teach them and those who gather as they travel from place to place, but then Jesus turns things up a notch, pushing Peter (and the rest of the disciples) to a level beyond what they might have expected.

In Matthew 14, *"Immediately after this (just after teaching and feeding the 5,000), Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake while he sent the people home. Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone. Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves.*

*About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came to them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him, they screamed in terror, thinking he was a ghost. But Jesus spoke to them at once. "It's all right," he said. "I am here! Don't be afraid."*

At this point, what is Peter thinking? Maybe something like, my rabbi who I am striving to be like in every way sent me out to teach and heal, and I did it, but now, now he's out there walking on the waves . . . if he's out there, I have to be out there . . . before I get out of this boat, I'm going to make sure that it's him!

*Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you by walking on water."*

*"All right, come," Jesus said. (Surely the words that Peter didn't really want to hear . . .)*

*So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.*

So Peter is out of the boat and like Jesus he's doing it! He's walking on the water. But then he looks around at where he is, gets scared, and begins to sink. He's trying to be like his rabbi, but he's failing. He can't do it, it's too scary, it doesn't make any sense, he doesn't have superpower. He's way, way, way outside of his zone of comfort and he's floundering. But Jesus is still there on the water, not sinking. Peter's seen his rabbi do all sorts of amazing things, and Peter cries out for help to Jesus, believing that Jesus has the power and ability to save him.

*Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. "You don't have much faith," (ouch!) Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" And when they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped."*<sup>2</sup>

After rescuing Peter, Jesus asks, "Why do you doubt me?" But who or what is Peter doubting? We may read this passage and think that Peter simply doubts Jesus, but that's not entirely accurate. It isn't that Peter is doubting Jesus' power, because he looks at Jesus, and Jesus isn't sinking. In fact, it's clear that he doesn't doubt Jesus' power because he cries out to Jesus for help. Peter doubts that he can do it, he doubts Jesus' belief about him, and this is why Jesus chastises him.

Now it is interesting to note here that Jesus doesn't have just one disciple, he's got twelve. Twelve guys who are following him for the purpose of becoming like him in every way. Where are the other 11? They're in the boat. Even more than Peter, they don't even seem to entertain the possibility that they might be able to do it. They don't believe that they can't do it and they don't even try. "You guys go ahead, I'll keep the boat on course." Their doubt is so much stronger than Peter's that they can't even get out of the boat, and they miss out on the experience of a lifetime with Jesus.

Some of us aren't all that different from the disciples, are we? Jesus invites us to take a step in faith, to give something up, to make a move to become more like him, and we doubt that we can do it, even though Jesus believes in us, and is the one at work in us enabling us to become like him. The reality is if Jesus is at work within us and through us, is there any reason to doubt that we can become like Jesus?

Jesus and the disciples move on from this experience and Jesus continues to teach and to heal as he travels with the disciples, then in Matthew 16:

*When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 14:22-33

*"Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."*

*Then he asked them, "Who do you say I am?"*

*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

*Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven, and whatever you open on earth will be opened in heaven." Then he sternly warned them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

Throughout the Gospels, Peter is the voice of the disciples answering Jesus questions, maybe because he is the appointed "spokesperson" for the disciples, maybe because he grasps what Jesus is getting at more quickly than some of the others, or maybe because he's just simply bold and willing to stick his neck out when Jesus asks a question.

When Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus not only reaffirms that God is at work in Peter's life and that Jesus believes in Peter, but he also identifies Peter just like Peter identifies him. Peter is "rock" and will be foundational in the building of the community of believers that is to come. Pretty amazing that a Galilean fisherman, who didn't have what it took to become the disciple of other rabbis, is identified by Jesus to be the "rock" on which God's Kingdom movement is going to build its community in the world, a community that not only will be built, but will prevail against the very powers of hell.

There are several senses of rock that Peter is in the remainder of the Gospels, some of which might even seem to suggest that while Jesus is correct to identify Peter as a rock, he's not the kind of rock that Jesus suggested here. Just a few verses after this, Peter is a stumbling rock, as he chastises Jesus for suggesting that Jesus will be killed, to which Jesus responds "Get behind me, Satan."

In the next chapter, at the Transfiguration of Jesus, Peter is dense like a rock as he suggests to the glorified Jesus, that they should build a shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on top of the mountain and stay there basking in the glory of the moment.

At Jesus trial, Peter is as cold and hard as a rock when he disowns his friend when it is suggested that he is one of Jesus' friends, denying that he even knows Jesus three times in quick succession.

But ultimately, when the Holy Spirit comes on the Day of Pentecost, Peter is the rock that Jesus believed him to be and told him he was, and his confession is the rock that serves as the first building stone for the church as he boldly and unapologetically preaches the first evangelistic sermon explaining the events of Christ's death and resurrection for all to hear.

Perhaps one of the best arguments for the historical reality of Jesus life, death, and resurrection and the possibilities of the Christian life is that a simple fisherman like Peter becomes an amazing force for the Kingdom of God, far beyond his wildest dreams, even to the point of his own crucifixion in Rome. In short, Peter becomes like his rabbi, teaching, healing, and even suffering and dying, only insisting on being crucified upside down because he was not worthy of being crucified in the same manner of his rabbi.

Jesus calls us to be like him, Jesus believes in us, and Peter's life demonstrates that it is possible. So the question for us is this: Will we believe Jesus when he says, "C'mon, follow me. You can be like me."

Maybe you are here today and Jesus is calling to you. Maybe he's inviting you to follow him for the first time. Maybe you are examining the Christian life, maybe you don't feel like you are good enough, you see people around you who are seeking after Jesus and you think you can't do it. Jesus says, follow me, you can be like me.

Maybe he's inviting you out onto the water, calling you to do something you aren't sure you are capable of doing. Maybe you are hearing Jesus tell you, that you don't need so much stuff, he's inviting you to simplify. Maybe you are hearing Jesus invite you to change your

attitude, to be less angry, to be less negative. Maybe Jesus is inviting you give more. Maybe Jesus is prodding you to engage a neighbor or friend in a spiritual conversation or to share the story of what God is doing in your life. Maybe Jesus is inviting you reconcile and restore a relationship. Maybe Jesus is inviting you to forgive someone, or maybe even yourself. Maybe Jesus is inviting you let go of a habit or addiction. Maybe Jesus is simply inviting you to know him better, spend more time studying scripture, or spend more time in prayer. Maybe Jesus is calling you out of where you are and into something totally new, something you've never done before, maybe even beyond what you have ever dreamed.

I don't know what it is for you . . . but I believe that if we listen, Jesus is calling, inviting, "come, follow me . . . I believe in you. I believe you can do it. I believe that you can be like me."

There are many reasons that we may give to doubt ourselves. We may think that we just can't do it. It's impossible. We're not spiritual enough, we're too old or we're too young. We don't have enough experience. We're don't know what to say. We're afraid, or we don't know how.

Wherever you are right now, whatever is going on in your life, Jesus believes that you can be like him. He is the one at work in you and through you molding, shaping, and transforming you into his likeness. Just like Peter, the "rock," Jesus believes in you, you can be like him.

## **Jesus Believes in You: Simon becomes Peter**

### **Questions for further discussion**

Why is Simon (Peter) fishing when Jesus meets him in Matthew 4:18?

How does Jesus view Peter (and Andrew)? See Matthew 4:18-20

Have you ever had someone tell you that they believed in you or that they believed you could do something you weren't sure you could do? If so, how did that make you feel? Did it affect your ability to do it?

In Matthew 14:22-32, Jesus comes walking across the lake to the disciples. Knowing that a disciple is supposed to do everything his rabbi does, Peter gets out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus. Peter loses faith and begins to sink, and in faith he calls to Jesus to save him, yet Jesus asks him why he doubted. Who/what does Peter doubt?

Have you ever doubted yourself? How did that affect you?

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. Upon hearing Peter's answer, Jesus commends him, and announces that his new name is Peter (or rock), and that upon Peter and his confession, Jesus would build his church. How is Peter's confession a "rock" for the church?

Later in the Gospels, we read of Peter's denial of Jesus, yet Peter is the foremost voice on the day of Pentecost and in the early chapters of Acts.

How is Peter transformed from "denier" to stalwart proclaimer?

What hope do we receive from the story of the "Rock" upon whom Jesus built the church?

Are there things in your life that Jesus is calling you to do that you don't believe that you are capable of?

How does it help you to follow Jesus knowing that Jesus believes in you?

What is Jesus calling you to do that maybe you don't believe you can do?