



August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023 • Back to School Blessings in Worship and Sunday School • In-Person and Online Worship

## **“You Got This!”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Matthew 16:13-20*

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

What a week! Lots of rain, some wind, and our first—and hopefully last—“hurriquake.”

And still, here we are, back today for Back-to-School Blessings as a new school year begins. I know that for families, the transition from summer mode to school mode can seem like something of a “hurriquake” in family schedules so we’re here to bless you and to ground this new year in the solid rock of faith and faith community.

Be sure to get a Back-pack tag today after worship. You can put it on your backpack or purse or golf bag, in your wallet or on your briefcase, on your laptop case or your Pickleball paddle bag—anywhere that you’ll see it frequently to be reminded of God’s love for you and God’s abiding presence in your life. This year’s theme is on the cover of your Order of Worship: “You Got This!” What a great affirmation to hear for anyone headed into a new year at school, or any kind of challenging situation. “You Got This!” God says to us, again and again. What a vote of confidence in each of us from our Creator God.

Truth be told, I don’t think that’s a direct quote from Scripture. If you find it, let me know!

But nevertheless, it’s the message we hear in Jesus’ call of Peter. It’s the message we hear in the very foundation and formation of the church itself. You got this, Peter. You got this, people. On you, with you, through you—I will build my church.

This story from Matthew’s Gospel that Witney read for us brings us a scene in which Jesus is teaching his disciples. He says to them: “some people think I’m John the Baptist. Some think I’m Elijah. But who do you say that I am?” Who do YOU say that I am?

Can’t you just see Simon Peter in the front row, waving his hand eagerly, certain that he has the right answer? “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus seizes the moment. “Blessed are you Simon, for God has revealed this to you. From now on you will be called ‘Peter’ and on this rock I will build my church...”

Jesus uses a little word play here—calling him “Peter,” from the word *petros*, and “rock” from the same root, “*petra*.” He’s saying “your new name is rock and on this rock I will build my church.” Jesus is telling Peter who HE, Peter, really is.

If you think about it, Simon Peter would probably not have been the leading candidate for this job. He was hardly a saint. In fact, he was pretty normal, pretty much like many of us. He was an ordinary fisherman. He could be impetuous, quick to betray Jesus when his own safety was at stake, quarrelsome, a man of little faith. In the story we heard just a couple weeks ago, Peter was trying to walk on water but was sinking fast as his faith wavered.

Yet in his better moments, Peter got it. Amidst all the crazy mix of characteristics that made him who he was, he could from time to time, be the one to nail it: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And on one such as this, Jesus builds the church. From one such as this, God preserves the church amidst anything death can throw at it.

In this, I believe that God is a realist. Choosing one such as this Simon Peter, a fisherman with a little bit of faith, moments of prophet insight, and episodes of shameful betrayal, God establishes the church. And therefore, we can trust that God is continuing to work through the likes of you and me to preserve this beloved church through such a time as this, and through all time. You got this, Peter. You got this, people. My confidence is in you, says our God.

And then he makes a very profound promise: I will build my church and the gates of Hades—all the powers of death—will never prevail against it.

What a word to hear in our time. That church is changing. The church of tomorrow surely won’t look like the church of today, and certainly not like the church of yesterday. Authors Jim Davis and Michael Graham published a book just this week entitled: “The Great De-Churching.” In it, they painfully document what they call “the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country...More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, and all the Billy Graham Crusades put together.”

There are many reasons for this, more than I can list out today. But we have a sense of this don’t we? We see it. We experience it ourselves. Faith and church do not play the same role in the lives of many people and families as once was the case.

But still, here we are in 2023, a new both/and church, worshipping, praying, giving, serving in-person and online. The bedrock is solid. Everything may be changing around us—not just the church, but retail businesses, restaurants, the United States Postal Service, college football—changing. Sometimes it feels like a great “hurriquake,” doesn’t it? And yet we proclaim: “Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today, and forever.” And that, folks is in Scripture, Hebrews 13:8.

We can see and hear the truth of that abiding affirmation in the story coming out of the churches on Maui. In the recent devastating fires, one of the hardest-hit places was the town of Lahaina on the island’s Northwestern edge. The fire decimated its historic center and, at its heart, our United Methodist Church and also Waiola Church, the oldest on the island and part of the United Church of Christ. In a recent interview, the minister of that church, Rev. Anela Rosa, talked about what it means to lose Lahaina and what it will take to rebuild it.

Born into a Catholic family, she got involved with the church in different capacities from a young adult leader to serving as a deacon, serving as a board member, being a treasurer because, she said: “I felt that it was important that my young voice was heard amongst these elders, because they’re not going to be around for very long. And I need to learn from them what they did, what their thoughts were so that we could carry on the history and the foundation of Waiola Church--we celebrated our 200th anniversary just a few months ago.”

A pastor encouraged her to become a pastor, sort of like Jesus calling out Peter to be the Rock, and that’s where she serves to this day. After the fire, she said: “I had heard rumors that the church was completely down to the ground. And then when I saw the pictures, I looked at the front lawn. It was still green. The tea leaves were still green. A little bit of the foundation was still there. And the back side, where we had stained glass windows, they’re still standing. And the front door that had stained glass windows are still standing. But to see at least that part, there’s hope...”

“[these] are strong congregants. That’s what this church is about. It’s about surviving. It’s about being together. And I hope that this is where we move forward from with the congregation now, I really hope so. And I have faith in my congregation that they will. I believe their belief is very strong and their faith is very strong.”

Can't we hear the voice of God through Pastor Rosa, affirming the faith and the strength and the resilience of the people of the church? We may not always see ourselves this way, but God see us, God knows us, God calls us by name and lifts us up and gives us strength to carry on. "You got this!" God says to us, again and again and again. Hear God saying to you: "You Got This \_\_\_\_\_" and fill in your name.

So, let's start this new school year in the spirit of our Prayer of Dedication for today: "God, our Teacher, fill the year before us with miracles of your mercy and strength, and help us appreciate most of all the bedrock miracle of your presence with us in every single, ordinary, sacred moment. Lead us this school-year into life-giving rhythms of grace and light, where our regular routines become the framework for worship and blessing."

We Got This, church, and together we rejoice to live into God's new future.

AMEN

Notes:

Nicholas Kristof. *"Americans Are Losing Their Religious Faith."* NYT Aug. 24, 2023.

NYT The Daily. August 14, 2023. Interview with Pastor Anela Rosa.