

Today, we have the great privilege to ordain Rev. Becky Albritton into deacon ministry, and to install Ron Alford, Ellen Hinton, Cher Moss, and Jane Pearce as collaborators in the journey.

Now it may seem strange to ordain someone who has already been ordained to Gospel Ministry. Our action here today is not a commentary on Becky's previous ordination but is instead a reflection to be intentional in the ways we call one another. When we call deacons of Millbrook Baptist Church, we acknowledge, as a congregation, and in a very formal way, our recognition of their sacred gifts, and our trust and desire for them to serve in ways that will affect the spiritual life of our congregation. And when we lay hands on them, and offer words of hope and encouragement, we do so to bless them for this particular season and this particular purpose. This is important work. This is sacred work. This is work that is set apart. So too, is our blessing.

And of course, with our blessing comes a charge.

Today's charge is rooted in an important text: Matthew 16:13-20, commonly referred to as Peter's Confession. Not confession as a disclosure of wrongdoing, or an admission of guilt, but confession as a statement of what he believes, what he faiths and professes to be true: Jesus Christ is Lord! Hear now these good words:

Matthew 16:13-20

16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

16:14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

16:15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

16:17 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.

16:18 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.

16:19 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."

16:20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Charge to Deacons:

The August lectionary passages have been eventful. Week one: In the wilderness, Jesus breaks bread, and feeds the multitudes. Week two: Early one morning, Jesus ghost-walks across the sea, going out to meet the disciples. And Jesus even lets Peter in on the action. Saves him from drowning, too. Week three: In the Region of Sidon and Tyre, Canaanite Country, Jesus meets a woman who challenges and ultimately redefines his calling. And today, week four, in

Caesarea Philippi, the administrative capital of the Galilee, Peter offers a profound confession: Jesus is Lord.

Now remember, Matthew's Gospel is rooted in its Jewishness. The Exodus, for this community, is not just something that happened, but continues to happen. It's the central theme of life: God liberates Israel in every generation. And Peter, like any devout disciple, longs for the day when a Messiah, a charismatic and transformative figure, will liberate Israel from its modern Pharaohs, and illumine the divine in new ways for humanity.

What a month of liberation it's been for Peter! Stuck in the wilderness, and beholden to Herod's greedy system of distribution, Peter can't imagine how to feed the masses. Jesus invites Peter into God's constant source of provisions.

Stuck in the vastness of a tempestuous and topsy-turvy sea, Peter cannot imagine a source larger or more creative than nature. And yet Jesus reminds Peter of the Creator who separates and stills the waters. Jesus offers Peter the assurance of peace in a harried world.

Stuck in the quicksand of systemic racism, classism, and sexism, Peter, nor any practicing member of Jewish faith in First-Century Palestine, nor even Jesus himself, can imagine a God-centeredness that transcends Israel's stubborn boundaries. Geographic. Cultural. Traditional. Political. Social. But a persistent woman is also compelling, and Jesus is reminded that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Peter watches as Jesus is liberated from the unchallenged assumption of being righteous, and, instead, is driven to do what is right and what is just.

A month ago, Peter might have expected Messiah to be someone fashioned like Moses, a warrior, and a political leader. Or maybe someone like Elijah – fiery is always good! Or maybe Jeremiah. Who doesn't like a voice that is provocative and prophetic, even if a little weepy? Or maybe even John the Baptist – camel hair and wilderness ventures are good for the soul! Surely, Messiah will be someone recognizable, a warrior, or a priest, or a king, or even a proclaimer.

But here's what happens. Just as Jesus does not come to abolish the idea of Torah, but rather to fulfill it, so too, Jesus comes in a way that fulfills the role of Messiah. God can no longer state Their investment/solidarity in humanity simply by inspiring/provoking generals, princes, judges, or prophets, but rather God intends to experience humanity firsthand. God in the person of Jesus, will know the joys and sorrows of God's people. Because God will live alongside God's people.

“Who do you say I am, “Jesus asks?”

Simon Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

And it's this confession, it's this rock, upon which the Church is built.

I believe Jesus' question to Peter is also the primary question for any community of faith. “Who do you say I am?”

What is it that we want to tell the world about our Creator, Millbrook? And as Jesus-followers, what is it about the Jesus experience that illumines our sense of the divine?

That's what Church is for. We exist to confess, or profess, or witness, or proclaim what we know of God in the world. I believe that's a really great thing! I believe it's a remarkable opportunity and responsibility.

And yet even as I say this, I know I may have lost some of you in the audience, because that word *confession* comes with a whole lot of baggage. Words like confess, witness, and proclaim can bring up feelings of coercion, and guilt, and violence, and rigidity. And nearly every Baptist has a complicated relationship with anything creedal.

If *confession* is a challenge for you, let me also offer the word *celebration*. Celebration. I believe, Millbrook, we are a people who wish to celebrate, and express, and share the goodness of a loving God that loves the creation They created. And I believe, we are a people who see God illumined in hearing the stories of Jesus, in seeking to model his hospitality, creativity, and generosity, and in breaking bread with one another. I believe this is something to confess, and I believe this is something to celebrate.

Okay, that's the 10,000 foot view of today's text. Here's where the charge comes in, Becky. And it's derived from a footnote. Last week, the lectionary included Psalm 133. How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! And there's a mention of Mt. Hermon, a large peak that rises above the border of modern-day Syria and Israel.

The setting of today's text is Caesarea Philippi, a city built to both honor and enforce the emperor's power and status. With Caesarea you get a shout out to Augustus, and with Philippi a nod to the famed Greek ruler, Philip. And within this city, there is also a temple to

honor the Greek God Pan, and not just any temple, but an exquisite one made of white marble.

And it just so happens, that Caesarea Philippi, home of this great temple to Pan, sits at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

Psalms 133 compares the unity, and the provisions, and the community we find in our kindred connection to God and neighbor with the fullness and generosity of Mt. Hermon's dew. Bless be the tie that binds! Sweeter, fuller, richer, more constant than a Blue Ridge stream!

Now think about Pan's Temple. I want to ask you to imagine the audacity of this temple's claim. Mt. Hermon is more than 9,000 feet high. That's like taking Mt. Mitchell and adding Pilot Mountain and Kings Mountain on top of it. And let's add Trash Mountain for good measure. Its icy peaks provide life-giving water for hundreds of miles.

Now step inside the city gates of Caesarea. There are marble columns, and coins with the emperor's face, and armed guards, and a temple bureaucracy who will seek to make you believe that it's the emperor who breeds new life, who offers provisions, who sets the sun in the sky, and stacks the mountains toward the heavens. Caesarea Philippi is the ultimate statement of power. It's so audacious, it seeks to use its enormous shadow to blind its inhabitants from their true and authentic source. And yet Peter can see beyond the shadows. At the foot of a mighty mountain, the view obstructed by Caesar's temple, Peter identifies true Lordship. And then he spends a lifetime seeking to trust in the life-giving sustainability of that source.

Becky, we don't live in the shadow of Pan's temple, but there are plenty of shadows in our world. Now, more than ever, Millbrook is looking for ways to make God's love, presence, and justice more tangible for our neighbors, because now, more than ever, the world needs experience God's love, presence, and justice. Now more than ever, we are looking for ways to profess the authentic Jesus in the world.

We need your vision. We need your resolve. We need your creativity. We need your determination to help us see life-giving peaks. And here is what we recognize: There is power in your presence! You, Becky, have a unique way of filling every moment you are here with purpose. You have hoped with us, prayed with us, sang with us, laughed with us, grieved with us, passed God's peace with us; you've loved us, and let us love you back.

More than anything, you, have been YOU. God made you. And God loves you. And God has called you. And we're grateful, because Millbrook needs you!

So here's your charge. Notice us. And notice God working in this place. And allow God to fill you with the kind of presence that helps you listen, and love, and learn, and serve, and laugh, and sing hymns like nobody's looking. Allow the Spirit to fill you with insight that rightly recognizes Messiah, and courage that dares to share God's goodness with others.

Be You, Becky!!! Be You!!! God's beautiful, wonderful you. Because we need you. And we are eager to receive your gifts.

Amen.