No sermon goes exactly as I plan it. This is the manuscript that I walked into the pulpit with this morning, and the sermon followed what is below, but it also had points that took on a life of their own.

THE SETTING: CAESAREA PHILIPPI

I find this an interesting passage of Scripture. Where it takes place is in Caesarea Philippi.

A number of years ago one of my sons-in-law and I were able to go to Caesarea Philippi. The Arabs call it Banias, which is their way of saying Paneas (Πανειάς), Bs and Ps being indistinguishable in their tongue. And it is called that because it was the home of the worship of Pan.

You see that the Greeks conquered the Jewish people and the Greeks were fanatics about their religion and their culture. They wanted all men and women to be Greeks. They wanted to impose Greek Philosophy, Greek drama, Greek language and Greek religion on everybody. And they were very tolerant of everybody except for people who didn't want to go along with them. And so they forced Greek ways on the Jewish people.

This was headquarters for the worship of the Greek god Pan. It was a pagan place. It was a pleasant place. It is above where the Jordan River flows. It had a high elevation and it was cool and pleasant and it was a center for culture and many other things.

THE CONFESSION

It is in such a place that the Lord Jesus extracts from Peter this famous confession. He does so by asking his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?"

And they begin to talk as they are standing there, perhaps, by that stream, a beautiful picnic area.

"John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." So Jesus said, "But who do **you** say that I am?"

And Peter, ever brash and impulsive, says it so clearly, "You are the Messiah. You are the son of the living God, not the gods of stone that are carved on the walls of this community here at Caesarea Philippi, not the gods of these caves that are dead gods that cannot speak or hear. You are the Son of the living God. You are the Messiah."

A DIVINE REVELATION

And Jesus then turns to Peter and he says, "Blessed are you, Peter, son of Jonah, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you."

That is the first thing that stands out. And that is that the gospel confession never happens by means of human intellect alone. There is a prior move of the Holy Spirit. There is a move of grace that enables people to make this confession. Peter is there, and he makes the confession because the heavenly Father has given it to him. God the Father, through God the Holy Spirit, reveals the truth of who Jesus of Nazareth really is. Jesus of Nazareth is a real human being, just like you and me. But there is something more to Jesus than that. Jesus is the eternal Son of the eternal God. There never was a time that he was not. And Peter has come to this realization. He has come to this by revelation. He has come to this because there is a move of the Spirit of God.

"Flesh and blood has not revealed it to you."

PRAYER FOR THE MOVE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

As we think about the work of the Church in light of Peter's confession, there are many things that stand out. The greatest thing that this church can be about is prayer, because it is only prayer that moves the hearts of men, because as we pray God's Spirit responds to our prayers, and he moves in the hearts of people. When we encounter people in work, in the office, wherever we meet people, we have to understand that they will never come to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior apart from a move of the Holy Spirit. But the good news of that is not fatalism. The good news of that is encouragement to pray. God wants his people to pray. God wants to save the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

God's people need to pray. And as we pray, we have an expectation that we will see results, that just as Peter in this pagan place, Banias, is moved to confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, so, as we pray, God's

Spirit will move on the hearts of people around us, who would never respond otherwise because they are dead in trespasses and in sins.

PRAYER AGAINST THE POWERS OF DARKNESS

But there is something else that is a reason for us to pray, and Jesus doesn't simply hint at it here. He tells us what it is. He mentions that there are dark powers.

Surely this is a place to remind people of the dark powers, Caesarea Philippi, the Greek god Pan, this community dedicated to the god Pan and the nymphs carved on the walls of the cliffs.

And he says, "Yes, the dark powers are threatening and they are very powerful," but he goes on to say in verse 18: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

That is a powerful statement, isn't it?

The Church is not simply up against flesh and blood. The Church is not simply up against reasoning with people and persuading people, because we see something here that isn't simply the need for a move of the Spirit in order for people to respond. But there is also a need of the Holy Spirit to move for people to respond, because there are dark, sinister, supernatural forces that oppose the gospel. He calls them the gates of hell.

You know, there is a real sense in which Christ might have felt as he looked and saw those carvings on the wall going back to the time of the Greek oppression of the Jewish people that he was standing at the very place of the gates of hell. For in all of the holy land, this was such a pagan place. The gates of hell.

VICTORY ASSURED

He tells Peter something very profound: "You are Peter (Petros, Πέτρος) and on this rock (petra, πέτρα) I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18).

There is certainly a reflection of Peter's name in that. And I don't believe that the Scripture, as we compare Scripture with Scripture, would say that the Church is built on Peter, but we would say this, that the Church is built on Peter and the prophets and the apostles, and that Peter—because he is the first to confess Christ

as Savior and Lord, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"—is given the privilege of being the first to open the doors of the kingdom of heaven to people in various circumstances: on the day of Pentecost to the Jewish people, later in Samaria, later to the first Gentile convert, Cornelius. It is on this solid rock, Christ, who is the chief stone, cornerstone, the Church is built and then on the apostles and prophets.

THE SUBTITLTY OF EVIL

The gates of hell… Think about the gates of hell for a moment. The gates of hell in our lives are not necessarily so glaring as those carvings on the wall at Caesarea Philippi. In fact, this very text points us in a direction of the subtlety that the gates of hell can sometimes take.

This amazing Peter, whom I admire so much because I see in him my own impulsiveness, gives this glorious confession of Christ as Savior and Lord, and yet when Jesus begins to talk later in this chapter, in verse 21, about the fact that he is on his way to Jerusalem because he must be persecuted, he must be prosecuted, he must be sentenced to death, he must die, and then he will rise again—Peter can't even register with the concept of resurrection. He is hung up with what Jesus said: "I am going to die."

And immediately, because Peter loves Jesus so much, he turns aside and he says to him, verse 22: "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (Matthew 13:22).

Now isn't that a good response?

"No way, Lord. I don't want you to die. You can't go to Jerusalem to die. This is terrible. Far be it from you. Mercy," he says. "Mercy."

But Jesus turns to Peter in verse 23 and says to him: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matthew 13:23).

THE CROSS OF JESUS

What Peter is really proposing to Christ is that Christ can have the crown without the cross. For the cross is indispensible in at least two areas as we can see in a moment. First, the cross is absolutely indispensible because there is no other way

that you and I can ever know forgiveness of sins. The Lord Jesus Christ leaves the glory of heaven as the eternal Son of God and comes to this world for one reason: he loves you just the way you are, with your hypocrisy, with your failure, with your promises you haven't kept, with your weaknesses, and he loves me with all those things as well.

That is why he leaves heaven. He loves you, and he gives himself up for you. The cross is the central mission of Jesus. It is only through the cross that Jesus purchases salvation for us. It is through the cross that he dies in our place as our substitute. Our sins are placed on him. God the Father made him, Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It is the way of the cross. And Peter, not understanding that, says, "Far be in from you, Lord. God forbid. Mercy," he says. "Mercy. No. Mercy," he says.

And Jesus said, "You are a temptation to me. You are a snare to me. Right now, Peter, you are as great a temptation to me as Satan himself was in the Judean wilderness when he tempted me to turn stones into bread, to cast myself down from the pinnacle of the temple and to fall down and worship him, because you are minding the things of mere men, and there is something divine here that is at work. I cannot turn away from the cross. The cross is why I have come. I must embrace the cross. I must suffer and die."

OUR CROSS

But there is something else here. As we read further, this turns into a comment by Jesus in verse 24 for you and me. Because Jesus took his cross and died as our substitute in our place, the call of the Christian life is a call to crucifixion. And that is what Peter doesn't want either. Jesus then moves in verse 24 to say: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

Make no mistake about it. We are not saved because we take up our cross. We are saved because Jesus took up his cross. But because he took up his cross, he calls us in the gospel, and he enables us by his Word and Spirit and his sacraments, daily to take up our cross.

I don't know what the cross is you are facing in your life today. Maybe it is that on Friday you got some news regarding your health, news maybe regarding cancer or heart disease or some other bizarre disease. And the temptation for you is to curse God and die, to give up in despair and quit and throw in the towel. There is a cross you are called to bear. In a sense, it is a cross to say, "I am going to praise God. I am going to be cheerful. I am not going to let go of my faith. I am going to continue to be a witness to my wife, my husband, my children and my grandchildren that they know that greater is he that is in me than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). I can overcome this. Even if it takes my life, I can overcome this, because Christ died for my sins because he is the Savior and through his stripes, ultimately, one day I will be healed."

Maybe the cross you have to bear is that someone has done some terrible act of betrayal to you. Maybe it is a spouse who betrayed you for a so-called best friend, or maybe it is a business partner who has robbed you. Or maybe, as I have had happen in my ministry over the years, someone has murdered a child of yours, a husband, a father, and the cross you have got to bear is to forgive that person. And that is a terrible crucifixion. I mean, that is an unbelievable thing.

The suffering that you are going through and in the face of it, you must come to God and say, "God, I don't know how I am ever going to forgive this person, but by faith I choose to forgive the person"—even if you have to say that to God a thousand times the first day.

"God, I choose to forgive this person. I choose not to rail against this person. I choose not to rail against you. I choose to pray for this person. I choose to pray that you will forgive this person that you will release this person. I choose to follow in the way of sorrows, the *Via Dolorosa*. I choose the way of the cross that says, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'" (Luke 23:34).

Or perhaps there comes this juncture in your life, and there is a decision to be made, and you know the way of man, and it is the easy way, it is the short way, it is the way of a little compromise, of a little suppressing of your ethics and doing the thing you know you shouldn't do. And you wrestle with it and you agonize over it. And finally you say, "Years ago I decided that I would follow Jesus, and he went to the cross so I would go to heaven. I am going to follow his example

because, as Calvin tells us, the true Christian life, the very essence of it, is self-denial, self-crucifixion."

Or we think of people in momentous circumstances. I think of Dietrich Bonheoffer and his choosing the way of the cross.

So you see, in this passage there are a number of things, aren't there? We begin in a place that is pagan and given over to evil and yet within that place Christ can call forth this confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

VICTORY IN JESUS

And it happens because God almighty reveals it to Peter, but even with Peter and this wonderful revelation and confession, he can be a spokesperson for evil. He can say the thing that seems so easy. We come back to the heart of the matter, which is this.

My brothers and my sisters in Jesus Christ, you have a mission and that mission is to follow Christ and your success is promised as you rely on him, your promise is that you will have opposition, your promise is that people will not understand what you are saying in the natural realm until the Spirit of God moves, and your promise is that there will even be Satanic, demonic opposition to what you do, that is why you have got to pray.

But as you pray you have got to believe. You have got to believe Christ's own promise. He promised this: "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18).

He has been building his Church for 2,000 years, and he is not through building it yet. And he has given you this promise: in spite of all that hell can throw at you, Christ will still succeed. He will still be victorious.

So I say to you: it is still the best day for the Church. The best days of the Church are ahead of us. There are unprecedented opportunities to present the good news that Jesus reigns. There are unprecedented opportunities to make Peter's confession our confession. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of the living God and he is victorious. By laying down his life for us, he has conquered death and because he has conquered death, therefore the gates of hell shall never prevail against the Church of Christ.