

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, August 24, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE LIVING GOD"

Matthew 16:16

Jesus of Nazareth is the most studied, the most talked about and the most written about person in history. Even a secular, irreligious age which has turned away from the church can't turn away from Jesus. Recently there has been an explosion of books examining his life and identity. These books fall into two broad categories, those that affirm the Biblical portrait of Jesus, and those which claim that he is someone different than whom the Gospel authors, writing under a misguided agenda, say he is. Recently, I read Lee Strobel's new book called "The Case for the Real Jesus" which outlines all the issues but in the end makes a strong case that Jesus is exactly who the Bible says he is. This book is in our church library if you're interested in the current controversies over Jesus' identity. For there is no more important question to settle in our hearts and minds than this, "Who is Jesus?"

Now Jesus has always been a controversial figure, even when he walked on the earth. When Jesus and his disciples came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, "Who do you say that the Son of Man is?" They said, "Some are saying that you are John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Now these were no small claims about Jesus. His teachings and his works had already put him right up there with Israel's great spiritual leaders and prophets. But Jesus made it plain that he was more than a prophet and more than a forerunner for the Messiah. He said to them, "**But** who do **you** say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Then Jesus said to Peter in effect, "How fortunate you are to really know who I am. And you didn't come to this insight just on your own; it was revealed to you by my Heavenly Father." Now Jesus had to go on and teach the disciples that the Messiah must suffer and die, which they found hard to accept. But Peter's answer is affirmed over and over again in the New Testament. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It's not just a statement of faith, it's a statement of fact. For when one honestly and fairly examines the evidence, it's the only conclusion one must draw.

Now I have read this passage many times, and preached on it several times, but this time something leapt out at me in Peter's confession- his last words, "**the living God.**" And "the living God" were not throw-away words, but vital

to Peter's confession. You see, in Caesarea Philippi there were fourteen temples dedicated to the Philistine god Baal. And people were still worshipping Baal there. In the region was also a deep cavern, said to be the birthplace of the great god Pan, the god of nature. Furthermore, the area was controlled by the Romans, so the expression "Caesar is Lord" was everywhere in the air, reinforced by a great white marble temple in Caesarea Philippi devoted to the divinity of Caesar. It was a religious area, but much of the worship was directed to pagan gods, idols, gods who were no gods at all, gods who were in fact, dead. In contrast, Jesus was not the Son of any of these dead gods, he was and is "the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Now this is what Christians confess about Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And by our faith in Jesus we have become children of God, not just created children of God, but redeemed children of God, redeemed into God's family by the precious blood of Jesus. We shall never be cast off or lost. We are God's sons and daughters who shall live in relationship with God forever. In an age of many false gods and dead idols, we belong to the true and living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father. The God we worship and serve is the living God. Let's think of some of the implications of this truth.

First, it means that God is active in our lives and in this world.

The God of the Bible is not an idol on the shelf which we dust off and bow to once in a while. God is the living God, the God who moves and acts. Now like a loving parent, God leaves room for his children's actions and decisions, even our blunders and errors. But neither is God absent or uninvolved in our lives. The living God is working out his plan and purposes in our lives and in our world, bringing people to faith in His Son, breathing his Holy Spirit into his people. God is a living God who knows our needs and draws near to help us.

A woman was at work when she received a call that her daughter was sick at home with a fever. Driving home she stopped at a pharmacy to get some her some medicine. But out in the parking lot she found that she'd locked her keys in the car. Panic-stricken, she looked around and to her amazement saw an old coat hangar on the ground. She knew that you could open a car door with these so she tried but without success. "Please God, help me," she cried out in her heart. Just then an old car pulled up with a greasy, bearded man wearing a biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "Oh great, God. This is who you sent to help me?" But she was thankful that he had come her way. As he got out of his car, she approached him and explained her problem. "No problem," he said, taking the coat hangar in hand. "I can do that." Within

seconds he'd opened the car door. She hugged him and said, "THANK YOU SO MUCH...you are a wonderful man." He replied, "Lady, I'm not wonderful. I just got out of prison today. I was in for car theft and just got out an hour ago." The woman hugged the man again and with joyful tears cried out, "Thank you, God, for sending me a professional!"

The living God is active in our lives. He is a God who cares, a God to whom we can pray, a God who answers prayer, and provides help, often in surprising ways. Now God's activity in our lives can often be quiet and unnoticed. The disciples didn't know it until Jesus told them, but God had been quietly acting in their lives and bringing them to the point of confessing Jesus as the Christ. The living God goes ahead of us, just as Jesus went ahead of the disciples; he leads the way, he makes provision for our needs even before we ask him, just as in Jesus God took the initiative to rescue a world in bondage to the power of sin and evil and death.

The living God acts in our lives in another way, too. You see, God has said to us in his word, "Here is the way of life, walk in it and you will live." And if some areas of our lives are not conforming to God's will, if we are walking outside His gracious boundaries, don't think that God is overlooking it or just letting it go. God is acting in our lives to chasten and correct us, and maybe to stir up feelings of guilt and remorse within us, all because he loves us and wants us to walk in the paths of blessedness rather than the paths of destruction and death. And if you feel some area of your life out-of-whack, it may well be that God is getting your attention, disciplining you, and turning you again towards the paths of righteousness. The living God acts, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly, to bring us to repentance. The living God is active in our lives and our world. His influence is inescapable.

God is the living God. **The second implication of this truth is that God is on the side of life.**

Now I almost said that God is "pro-life," but that has too many implications in the abortion question. But let me say that no matter where we are on the pro-choice, pro-life spectrum we must be disturbed by the fact that in Canada now there are 30 induced abortions for every 100 live births; in other words between 25 and 30% of pregnancies end in abortion. This is going to have profound and negative implications for Canadian society in years to come.

Well, I'm not going to speak for God on the abortion issue. The living God is a God of love, full of mercy and compassion and forgiveness. But in general, we must say that God is on the side of life. After all, God is the giver and creator of life, the one who calls life good, the God who makes us in his image

to be in relationship with Him, the God who has made provision for life on this earth, the God who desires us to have life in abundance.

Now the world is full of the merchants of death and fear. Death entered the world at the fall, and has destroyed and diminished life ever since. But death is God's not will for us; God's will for us is life. The Kingdom of God which broke through in Jesus' ministry is a Kingdom of life. Consider Jesus' healing works, both physical and spiritual. He raised at least three people from death. Jesus came to really bring people alive, to set them free from bondage to sin and death and fear and want. God is on the side of life, not death. The ultimate power of death has been swallowed up in the victory of the Crucified and Risen One. God is the living God, the God of resurrection power, who gives and blesses life, who raises up what is dead, who gives hope in place of despair, grants forgiveness for sin and gives healing for our wounds and diseases. Every medical discovery that brings life and healing comes from God, for he placed it in creation for humans to discover. And the living God will raise all of us on the last day; with willful unbelievers banished from God's presence forever; but those who have confessed Christ as the Son of the Living God living in God's presence and with all God's redeemed people forever. Our God is the living God. God is on the side of life.

Finally this. **Because God is the living God, we are to be living stones.**

After Peter made his great confession, Jesus said to him, "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church." This saying is open to several interpretations, but the most likely is this. Christ is the foundation of the church and Peter was the first rock set on the foundation. All subsequent believers, and that's us, are stones in the structure, stones Christ uses to build his everlasting church. It's interesting that Peter in his 1st letter says, "Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house..." (1 Peter: 2,4,5) Some translations, say, "like lively stones..." I like that. As children of the living God, we are to be living stones, not dead, lifeless stones, but lively stones, bright and shining witnesses to the transforming power of God's love and grace, filled with enthusiasm for our faith, for God's service, for the church. So may the living God breathe His Holy Spirit into us, and truly make us the living stones on which Christ is building and growing his church.