

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“A Living Stone and a Holy People”
Psalm 23:1-6
I Peter 2:1-12**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017**

Psalm 23:1-6

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Introduction

For the past few weeks we've been making our way through the First Epistle of St. Peter. We are using the selections provided for us by this year's lectionary and we're also using an old form of Scripture exposition that takes a verse-by-verse look at the passage. Last week we saw that Peter is calling his readers, and us, to be holy because God is holy and because we are born again by the work of Jesus Christ. Today, Peter is going to show us some examples of living holy lives. Hear now, then, the Word of God from the second chapter of the First Epistle of St. Peter, verses one to twelve.

I Peter 2:1-12

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

“A Living Stone and a Holy People”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We pick up our lesson from the Apostle Peter in the second chapter of his First Letter. Transitions in the Bible are surprisingly important, and sometimes require a more detailed look. Now, not every single transition is of weighty importance, but in this case Peter signifies a transition that resumes a previous argument. Last week, we ended with verses twenty-two and twenty-three of the first chapter. Hear those words again, “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” This is what the Apostle is referring back to. He is telling us, “Now that you’ve prepared your heart for holiness, love one another earnestly. Now this is how that love looks.” The Apostle is now about to list some things for us, but before we start that list, he says “put away.” The Greek word Peter uses is an aorist participle, which is better translated, “Having put away the things on this list, long for spiritual milk like infants.” We must first put away the things that divide us before we can be nourished by spiritual food. So, what is it Peter says we must first put away?

He says to put away “all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.” Listen to what he’s listing here and see if you can hear a pattern. “Genuine love requires ridding one’s life of all malice...including not only ill intent but also any actions harmful to others...[all] deceitfulness that harms others through trickery or falsehood...hypocrisy, [which is] the masking of inward evil by an outward show of righteousness...envy [which is] the opposite of thankfulness for good which comes to others, and all slander [or] any speech which harms or is intended to harm another person.”¹ What thread connects these? It’s not God, at least not directly. We can’t be malicious, deceitful, hypocritical, envious or slanders towards God because God knows our inward thoughts. If God knows us through and through, then we can’t rightly lie to God because he knows the truth. By now you should be catching on. So to whom do we show malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander? To our neighbors. To one another. To those whom we dislike or with whom we daily interact. Holiness is exemplified by our acts of love toward one another, and by extension toward God, in whose image all people are made. To be sure, this list is by no means comprehensive. Calvin, himself, says Peter “does not enumerate” all the works of the flesh, “but in those few things, as in a mirror, we may see that immense mass of filth which proceeds from our flesh.”² Calvin was a very vivid preacher and certainly had a way of painting pictures with words. While his language may be harsh and grotesque, his point is spot on. This list is but only a fraction of the bad things the human race is capable of.

Having put away these sinful things, that is after we’ve removed these and other vices from our hearts and our lips, we are to be “Like newborn infants.” Now, the Apostle here is not saying we are to be immature. In fact, it takes a great deal of maturity to be like newborn infants. Calvin, again, notes, “Men, when grown up, become imbued with envy, they learn to slander one another, they are taught the arts of mischief; in short, they become hardened in every kind of evil: infants, owing to their age, do not yet know what it is to envy, to do mischief, or the like things.”³ What Calvin is getting at is sometimes called child-like faith. We adults admire the faith and kindness that young children are wont to exhibit. I’ve heard it said, “Oh, I wish I had

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Tyndale NT Commentaries: 1 Peter*, Grand Rapids; Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988. Pages 93-94.

² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, CCEL, page 51.

³ Calvin, 50.

the faith of a child.” You can! It takes a lot of hard work, but you can have that kind of faith. That’s why I think it takes a lot of maturity to be like Peter’s newborn infants. It’s possible, but it’s hard because we have to put away the natural vices we use against our fellows. I struggle with that. Countless times have I been envious of the things people have. I try not to be hypocritical, but I know I don’t always practice what I preach. It’s hard. And the only way to break ourselves of this habit is to “long for the pure spiritual milk.”

Just as a newborn babe eagerly and frequently longs for milk, so too should we eagerly and frequently long for spiritual nourishment. Peter’s understanding of spiritual milk is not merely the base elements of Christianity. When Paul uses this milk metaphor in I Corinthians 3, he is speaking of basic Christian thought. For Paul writes in verse two “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.” Peter, on the other hand, speaks of “pure” spiritual milk. Remember, Peter is speaking about holiness here. The only pure spiritual nourishment for holiness is God’s Word. As born again—regenerate—Christians, we are to eagerly and frequently long for the Word of God to nourish us on the path of righteousness. “That by it,” says Peter, “you may grow up into salvation.” We cannot save ourselves by any actions we take or by any merit we possess. Instead, the salvation God has for us, we must grow into it, by exhibiting our salvation through good works and by following the commands of Christ, that is, the pursuit of holiness. Peter rounds off this line of thought in verse three with almost an exact quote from the Greek translation of Psalm 34:8. “If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” When we share in Communion later, remember you are tasting the goodness of the Lord. And when you are nourished by God, it is impossible to remain unchanged.

The reality is when we experience God, when we walk this path of righteousness, *we have* to change. We have to *be* changed. God calls us to be set apart, which means we cannot stay the same as our former selves. To better explain this, Peter introduces another metaphor by starting, “As you come to him.” In our journey towards Christ and with Christ, in our regular nourishing through Scripture, we are interacting with “a living stone.” A little later, Peter will quote from Psalm 118:22. Jesus himself quotes this passage when, in Matthew 21, Christ likens himself as the stone the builders the rejected. Paul, too, in I Corinthians 10, calls Jesus the spiritual Rock from whom Moses drew living waters. So, Peter, too, links Our Lord as this living stone who was “rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.” Now this description is only fitting of Christ Jesus, but here, Peter also says we are “like living stones.” It’s important to remember Peter’s audience. He isn’t likening us to Jesus Christ, rather, since Jesus is the cornerstone of the new Temple, then we are called to imagine ourselves as many and varied bricks that make up this new Temple. In this way, we “are being built up as a spiritual house.” This new, living Temple, the very Body of Jesus Christ, is made up of “a holy priesthood.”

This week at our Presbytery meeting, the preacher’s topic was the priesthood of all believers. In celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the Presbytery of the Peaks is taking various Reformation themes and using them as topics for different meetings. He said something that I thought was very meaningful, and, I’m afraid, I too often don’t affirm this. While I may be your pastor, I want to affirm that y’all are ministers, too. Each of you is doing ministry. If you’re active in a committee, you’re doing ministry. If you’re caring for an elderly parent or ailing spouse, you are doing ministry. If you’re sharing a little bit of your time to sit with someone,

you're doing ministry, too. If you're gathering as two or ten or twenty, and praying and reading Scripture, then you're doing ministry. Big or small, if you're engaged with one another in Christian love and fellowship, then by all means you are a minister, a member in the priesthood of all believers. Everything that you do on behalf of another or in glory to God, then you, as Peter says, "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

I want to stick with this theme, so I'm going to skip the Scriptural references Peter quotes, I'm sure we'll touch on those sometime in the future. For now, let's continue in this priesthood vein and pick up in verse nine. There, the Apostle says, "you are a chosen race." Now this is particularly astounding for Peter's original audience. The Apostle, here, is applying Old Testament language to these Gentile Christians. The Israelites are God's chosen people, God entered into a covenant with them, a covenant that is eternal. Peter says that because of this foundational cornerstone, which is Christ Jesus, and since we are living stones with him, we, too, are inheritors of this covenant. We, too, are a chosen people, only this time adoption isn't limited by ethnicity or nationality or language. No, when people are reborn through the Spirit, they are transformed into a chosen race that *is* the Body of Christ, and is not limited, save through regeneration. As I mentioned earlier, we are also "a royal priesthood" of all believers, commissioned to the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way, we are made into "a holy nation." Here again, Peter is not limiting this to a particular political entity. I love America, I love being American, but my friends, America is not what Peter has in mind. The nation that belongs to God is his regenerate people, the church invisible, God's elect. And these people are all over this wide earth. And, they are "a people for his own possession."

So what does it mean to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God? Peter tells us that our election is so "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you." The Christian life is active work, it's hard work. Remember, it's easier said than done to put away all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. But out of the "darkness" of our former selves, we have been brought "into [Christ's] marvelous light." Now, we are God's people, and we've received his divine mercy. My friends, this should move us. This fact alone should change us. In Christ, we are urged by Peter "to abstain from the passions of the flesh." The flesh is selfish. The flesh is individualistic. The flesh cares only for its own success, and is malicious, deceitful, and envious. The flesh cares not for the commands of Christ to love God wholly and one another deeply. Peter knows the mind that is in Christ wages a war with the flesh. And war is not pretty and rarely is it easy. Nevertheless, we are called to put away the desires of the flesh, and to "keep your conduct...honorable."

Before God's eyes, we are not justified by our works. Our salvation comes through faith in Christ and his work on our behalf. We are, however, justified by our works before the eyes of the world. There's a popular hymn that says "They will know we are Christians by our love." Christ and the Apostles teach that a good tree bears good fruit. When we put away malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander, we put on love, we take on honorable conduct. And when we have the love of Christ, we can't keep it hidden. When the power goes out, you don't turn on a flashlight and then put it under a shoebox. No, you use that flashlight to illuminate the darkness. When we care for one another, when we offer to God all glory, that light illuminates the darkness of this world. The Good News is in this way we are both living stones and a holy people.

Let us pray. Holy God, you have called us to be in this world but not of this world. Help us in this endeavor, we pray, for the path of righteousness is not easy. Christ tells us to take his yoke for his burden is light and he will give us rest. In this we place our hope. Teach us, O God, to put away the things of this world, the things that divide us from you and from our neighbors. Teach us to put on the love of Christ, and in so doing, we become a holy people, a priesthood for your service. For this we give you all praise and honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen.