

Scripture Reading for May 10 2020

Exodus 19:3-6 (NIV)

³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

1 Peter 2:2-10 (NTE)

² As newborn babies, long for the spiritual milk, the real stuff, not watered down. That is what will make you grow up to salvation – ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. ⁴ Come to him, to that living stone. Humans rejected him, but God chose him and values him very highly! ⁵ Like living stones yourselves, you are being built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that will be well pleasing to God through Jesus the Messiah. ⁶ That’s why it stands in scripture: “Look! I’m setting up in Zion a chosen, precious cornerstone; believe in him! You’ll not be ashamed.” ⁷ He is indeed precious for you believers. But when people don’t believe, ‘the stone which the builders rejected has become the head cornerstone’, ⁸ and ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence’. They stumble as they disobey the word, which indeed was their destiny. ⁹ But you are a ‘chosen race; a royal priesthood’; a holy nation; a people for God’s possession. Your purpose is to announce the virtuous deeds of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. ¹⁰ Once you were ‘no people’; now you are ‘God’s people’. Once you had not received mercy; now you have received mercy.

Sermon: Living Stones

I mentioned last week that the writer of 1 Peter claims that the sufferings of Christians that arise directly from faithfully following Jesus is nothing less than our participation in the ongoing story of Jesus.¹ This might seem an odd concept, even pretentious! Yet, we find the same idea in the writings of Paul and in the gospels.² Indeed Jesus, as he commissions his 12 disciples for a mission trip, warns them to *expect* to suffer simply for following him.³ That reality is one reason we need to be grounded in *who* we are and to *know* with a passion the *continuing* story of God of which we are a part. Our reading today explores those connections to multiple Old Testament images, not least as a means to rally the troops and to help them feel less isolated in their sufferings. It's never a bad thing to pause and reflect on our connectedness with the worldwide church, both in the present and throughout history and to remember that "God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year."⁴ Let's hear what the writer of 1 Peter has to say.

At the end of chapter one, he reminds his readers that "The word of the Lord endures forever."⁵ He's quoting from Isaiah 40 and that theme is repeated in Isaiah 55, where God says: "My *word* goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."⁶ The writer of 1 Peter says "And *this is the word* that was preached to you."⁷ In other words, God *will* keep his promises - and it's therefore implied that your present sufferings will not be in vain. He continues, "Like newborn infants, *long* for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation - if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."⁸ He uses this metaphor of a newborn baby to connect with his earlier reference to being born again.⁹ This image of milk being given to babies was commonly used to mean the elementary teaching to be given to new converts.¹⁰ In this case, "the living and abiding word of God"¹¹ is both a gift and a grace through which God is transforming his people

¹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/As-Slaves-of-God-Live-as-Free-People.pdf>. See 1 Pet 2:18-25, 3:8-4:19. (And this suffering is itself deeply rooted in the Old Testament.)

² For example, see: Mark 8:35, 10:29-31; Matt 5:11; Acts 5:41, 9:16; Rom 8:17-18; 2 Cor 1:3-7; Phil 3:10-11; 1 Tim 1:7-12.

³ See Matt 10, especially: v22-23.

⁴ The title of a great hymn! See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liuxet4pJ-c>.

⁵ 1 Pet 1:25 – quoting Isa 40:6-8.

⁶ Isa 55:10-13. [In between are messianic oracles, including those of the suffering servant (Isa 53) – cited in 1 Pet 2:21-15.]

⁷ 1 Pet 1:25.

⁸ 1 Pet 2:2-3 (NRSV, NET, NTE). Note (1): Although it is translated "spiritual" the Greek adjective is not derived from the root of spirit (*pneuma*) but from *logos*, meaning "reasonable" or "rightly ordered." Other uses of *logos* in 1 Peter are 1:23; 2:8; 3:1. (2) Spiritual milk grows newborn Christians towards salvation. NRSV has *into* salvation, whereas NIV has *up in your* salvation. The former stresses salvation as the goal, the latter as a gift. For 1 Peter, Christians live in the promise of the fullness of God's mercy and have a foretaste of what that will be. This eschatological element cannot be overlooked (hence, NRSV/NET).

⁹ 1 Pet 1:3,23.

¹⁰ This use is *not* limited to Christian texts. However, in a Christian context, see also 1 Cor 3:1-3; Heb 5:12-13. 1 Peter lacks the contrast between the preliminary childish food and the adult nourishment. However, the adjectives attached to the term milk, namely pure and spiritual, indicate that the metaphor does refer to the true teaching necessary for growth as Christians.

¹¹ 1 Pet 1:23.

into a worshipping community, those who recognize God's ways and who have "tasted and seen that the Lord is gracious," as the psalmist puts it.¹²

Moving forward with a different metaphor, the writer takes the word "Lord" to mean Jesus - rather than God, saying: "Come to him, to that *living stone*; yes, humans rejected him, but God chose him and values him *very highly!*"¹³ Let's pause for a moment and consider "stones," for they can tell a *story*. Consider the diamond in an engagement ring, for example; it's is symbol of promise, commitment, and faithfulness. As you look at such a ring, it contains a precious story of hope and confidence for the future. Stones can therefore evoke *memories*. Let me give further examples; I have a rock a home from good friends in North-East England, where I used to live, that was taken from the local beach as a tangible reminder of our walks and talks together.¹⁴ I have another rock from our family vacation last summer in the Canadian Rockies; it was taken from the bed of a retreating glacier, a geological reminder of our planet's story. Stones were significant in the Old Testament too, here's just one example: When Joshua led the nation of Israel into the Promised Land, they miraculously crossed the River Jordon on dry ground, just as they did when they left Egypt through the Red Sea. Once over, God told Joshua to send 12 men, one from each tribe, back to the center of the still-dry river bed and gather 12 stones to serve as a reminder to the people in years to come of what *God* had done.¹⁵

The risen Jesus is the *living stone*, the *witness* to God's ongoing salvation of his people. I am told there is some Hebrew wordplay here as the word for "stone" [*eben*] is very much like the word for "son" [*ben*]. And as the writer says, humans rejected him then, and they still do, but the resurrection reveals that God has vindicated Jesus, the precious, chosen Son to *all* who have "tasted and seen" that Christ is gracious¹⁶ But writer develops this metaphor further by saying that his readers are also "living stones." Just as Jesus is alive and life-giving, *so are we*, that is our *identity* too, because God¹⁷ is graciously at work in you and me. We too may be rejected by people for identifying ourselves as followers of Jesus, but the point here is that we too have been chosen by God¹⁸ and are precious and honoured in his sight.¹⁹ God is building a "spiritual house" with these living stones, the static Temple in Jerusalem is no longer relevant;²⁰ in other words we are being incorporated into a new *community*. This allusion to the Temple causes the writer to think of priests. We living stones are *all* to be mediators between people and God, called to live lives of holiness,²¹ faithfulness, and mutual love.²² Ministers

¹² 1 Pet 2:3, citing Ps 34:8. The implication perhaps being, "you know what I'm talking about"!

¹³ 1 Pet 2:4 (NTE).

¹⁴ Dry-stone walls in Britain are centuries old and tell a story of clearing the land for farming (cf. Isa 5:2).

¹⁵ See Josh 4:1-9. For stones as a "witness" and "reminder" see Josh 24:27.

¹⁶ There is, perhaps, an implied connection to Holy Communion here (?)

¹⁷ This is a work of the Holy Spirit. This also connects with the doctrine of election – being "chosen" by God; 1 Pet 1:1.

¹⁸ This is from God's perspective/initiative. That invitation is open to others but they are free to reject it.

¹⁹ This kind of suffering does *not* mean that God has rejected them; recall Jesus was rejected by humans but chosen by God.

²⁰ If this letter was written after AD 70, the readers would have known that the Temple had been destroyed.

²¹ 1 Pet 1:15-16. Some find a connection here with Luther's stress of the "priesthood of all believers."

²² 1 Pet 1:22. Holiness, faithfulness, and mutual love are our "spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" 1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1. [Not forgetting the image of Jesus as our High Priest and mediator, our exemplary priest.]

are, then, *not* that special! What God has begun in Jesus the Messiah, God is continuing to accomplish through both *you and me*.

Mention of precious stones and the Son moves the writer to speak of Jesus as the “cornerstone” and he cites Isaiah 28:16. The cornerstone, as the name implies, is chosen for its 90° angle and is set at the corner of two intersecting walls. Today they are often ceremonial, engraved with a date and perhaps the name of the builder or architect, but it *signifies* the stable basis for construction of the *whole* building. Since the cornerstone is Jesus, it is *he* who – in essence – determines the building’s shape and design. We living stones are therefore placed with *reference* to him. The writer then introduces several pairs of polar opposites to stress his point, namely: honour and shame; choose and reject; belief and unbelief. The readers of 1 Peter were described as “resident aliens”²³ may well feel *shame*, but as living stones *chosen* by God, they – like Jesus - are precious and *honoured*.²⁴ Those who *believe* recognize Christ as being *honoured* by God, but those who don’t believe *reject* the cornerstone as the reference stone for the building of their own lives. This willful rejection is mentioned in Psalm 118:22,²⁵ and tripping over this discarded cornerstone alludes to Isaiah 8:14. The writer is therefore reminding his readers – including us - that *God’s* story, of which we are a part, extends back to the Old Testament. Put another way, the New Testament is a *continuation* of God’s rescue of his people and we *need* the Old Testament to make sense the New. Before moving on, it is worth remembering that people back then didn’t worship God in churches but in people’s homes or in a secluded place outside. So this metaphor must not be equated with establishing a *physical* building to worship God. Sacred spaces have value and are a visible sign to the faithfulness of God. But maintaining the church *building*, though important, is *not* our primary calling; we are to be *living* stones – not static ones. How we live in holiness, faithfulness, and mutual love is our *primary* witness to the wider community of God’s presence and grace in our lives.

The writer reaches a climax in his affirmation of his readers using more Old Testament imagery. He says: “You are *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own*, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”²⁶ Let’s unpack this briefly. The mention of “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people of God’s possession” all allude to God’s deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt, as we heard in our Old Testament reading.²⁷ And, of course, these titles - along with being “a chosen race” - originally referred to Jews, God’s *chosen* people. The original readers of 1 Peter were *non-Jews*, so now they are implicitly being *included in* God’s own people through the death and resurrection of Jesus.²⁸ That’s good news; God’s grace is *not* restricted by ethnicity! However, mention of being “chosen” trips up many – not least in the Presbyterian Church and its traditional doctrine of predestination. For the writer of 1 Peter, belief and

²³ See Pet 1:1,17; 2:11.

²⁴ 1 Pet 2:6 – citing Isa 28:16.

²⁵ Jesus cites this verse in Mark 12:1–12, as does Peter before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:11. 1 Peter does *not* link this rejection with the Jewish leadership but with all who reject Christ (1 Pet 2:7).

²⁶ 1 Pet 2:9. See also Isa 43:21, 61:6; Exod 19:6.

²⁷ See Exod 19:5-6; Isa 43:21. Note that the verses alluded to in Exodus and Isaiah pertain to people wandering in the wilderness (resident aliens) or in exile. This context would also resonate with the audience of 1 Peter; i.e., God’s restoration in relation to exodus and exile, and the fact that the covenant God cares for his people in hard times.

²⁸ See 1 Pet 1:2-3.

disbelief and are the two responses to Christ. Those who believe are God's "chosen" and those who don't are "stumbling in the darkness."²⁹ Don't be offended here because enlightened worldly wisdom says the very opposite: it's Jesus and his followers who are rejected and humiliated. One could put it this way, faith and unfaith *are* matters of human choice, but the *consequences* of faith and unfaith have been predetermined.³⁰ Given the writer's use of polar opposites as a linguistic device to make his point, let's not stumble here over predestination and free will. And let's be reassured by words from 1 Timothy which proclaim that, "God *desires all* people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."³¹

Being "chosen" by God, then, is *not* a matter of pride but of *grace*,³² for it is God who has called us "out of darkness into his marvelous light"³³ (there's two more polar opposites). But the grace and mercy³⁴ we have received is, as the writer puts it, to *proclaim the virtuous deeds of Jesus the Messiah*.³⁵ It is *not* a private gift but a *public* one, since *through* us living stones God extends his love and grace to others. How everyone responds is not really our problem, for as Jesus tells us in the Parable of the Sower,³⁶ everyone will respond differently. What *is* our problem as a church is for us to be faithful in proclamation *and* action.

In conclusion, in hard times we need to know *who* we are, our identity, *our story*. Without that we are lost in the darkness. For many, our identity is wrapped up in our work and in this crisis, whether because people have been laid off or through lack of routine, we have lost a sense of *who* we are. Moreover, as a culture, we have lost our *story*.³⁷ As Christians we are part of *God's* story, *not* one we have written ourselves. It's a story that reaches back to Moses, the psalmist and the prophets.³⁸ If we truly grasp that, along with the Easter message, we regain *our* story and hence *our* identity. We become living stones that are connected with a community of Jesus-followers, present and past, who are all aligned with reference to the Cornerstone, Jesus himself. The writer of I Peter summarizes this passionate speech with an allusion to Hosea: "You once were *not* a people, but now you are *God's* people and have experienced his grace."³⁹ That being the case, let's live life fearlessly on that foundation. And why not mark this moment by selecting a special stone and keep it as witness and a reminder of what God *has* done - and *is* doing – even this time of crisis. Amen.

²⁹ 1 Pet 2:8-9. Moreover, in the doctrine of election, "chosen" *cannot* be decoupled from "grace."

³⁰ Moreover, faith is *not* just a matter of believing, it's a matter of *obedience* – see [1] And that means getting rid of "all evil and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander," (1 Pet 2:1; 1:14,22), and instead "we yearn like newborn infants for pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). All this is *very* practical!

³¹ 1 Tim 2:4. God's faithfulness requires responding faith.

³² See 1 Pet 2:10b – or "mercy." [Note: there is a balance between ecclesiology and eschatology (between the doctrine of the church and in the hope for God's final reign). We *are* chosen people and yet the reign of God has not yet fully come.]

³³ 1 Pet 2:9b; see also Acts 26:18; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5 – and links to Ps 107:13–14; Isa 42:16; 58:10.

³⁴ 1 Pet 2:10, see also Hos 1:9; 2:23.

³⁵ 1 Pet 2:9.

³⁶ See Matt 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, and Luke 8:4-15.

³⁷ That is a consequence of postmodernism and secularism; 'there is *no* (unique) story.'

³⁸ Indeed, back to creation!

³⁹ 1 Pet 2:10, see also Hos 1:9; 2:23.