

A Living Hope – Easter Season 2023 worship series

Psalms and 1 Peter

The Easter season is about living into the new reality of the resurrected Christ. The shocking news that death is not the end of the human story takes some reorientation to begin to understand the implications of such a profound truth. So, Eastertide is where we let this knowledge wash over us, and we begin, with joy, to embrace this new way of living.

Everything is different now. We'll never be the way we were before. Do those statements sound familiar? They are often said with regret or with sadness, the "woe is me" syndrome. But apply them to Easter, and suddenly they are statements of hope. I Peter says it this way: "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (*1 Peter 1:3 NRSV*).

This series allows us to explore this hope and to know it well enough to recognize it when we encounter it in our own communities. We paired the epistle texts with the psalm for each week to give us a flavor of both the understanding and the experience of hope. So, join us for this journey into the new world of a living hope that is ours in the resurrection as we give thanks to God.

Second Sunday of Easter- Fullness of Joy

April 16, 2023

[Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

We're still basking in the glow. Maybe we're exhausted from the excesses of the Easter celebration. Maybe even the choir wants a week off. Maybe the associate pastor is preaching. But we're still celebrating, or we should be. Notice the day is named "Second Sunday of Easter." That "of" is important. We are Easter people. All of our worship is Resurrection worship. We continue to proclaim that Christ is Risen when we gather for worship during this season. Well, yes, we can proclaim that all year long because every Sunday is Easter Sunday.

The epistle text for this week lends itself to being paraphrased into a creedal statement or affirmation of faith for the whole congregation to recite together. There is a proclamation quality to these words and to this day. But the mood of worship is one of celebration and joy. Yes, we are tired, and we don't have the holiday spirit enervating everyone. But still, we celebrate. Still, we sing praise because the shocking hope of Easter becomes the living hope of week-by-week worship and work. So, while we celebrate with the same enthusiasm and passion as we did on Easter, we are also beginning to teach how we live that joy. We are beginning to explore the implications of being disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world that doesn't really want transformation. This is why it is good we are working in a church that doesn't really want transformation either. We get to practice living out of this hope in this community so that we can then be the proclaimers to the rest of the world.

So, we worship completely, engaged, and focused on the worship moment, complete in and of itself. But with what do we send folks out from worship? What gifts, what questions, what suggestions go with those who have worshiped with you today? How is the living hope enacted in their lives day by day? Let the worship team be haunted by this question throughout this Eastertide series. Remember that worship doesn't end with the benediction; it continues into the rest of life and continues – or revives – when we gather again. Worship is a way of living and being, not simply an action we perform. This series is an opportunity to help communities rethink what it means to have a living hope throughout our lives. Encourage the fullness of joy in this worship moment and in the worship moments that will follow.

PREACHING NOTES

First Peter is not a letter we read all that often. It's just tucked away back there toward the end of the New Testament as though it was embarrassed to be included. "I'll just sit back here, out of the way, so as not to bother anyone," it says. "Call me if you need me. But I hope you won't. Really." And why so shy? Besides the fact that Peter had been through the wringer and was probably a little skittish.

Well, this letter isn't really for us. I mean it is, of course, all of scripture is God-breathed and useful for building up. This letter was written when the church was under constant threat; when the benediction was spoken in a whisper because everyone knew when they gathered again someone likely would be missing, caught up in the cleansing, deportations, and imprisonment. They were afraid of their neighbors. They were afraid people might discover that they practiced a minority religion, a suspect faith. They worried that neighbors might turn them in to the increasingly vigilant authorities who were out to make the nation safe. They were looked at with suspicion as they passed their neighbors on the street. They didn't feel safe in their own hometowns, their own places of work. They were, in fact, model citizens. They did jobs no one else would do. Christians were often the only ones who cared for the dead, who would treat the body as though it was something precious and give it a decent burial. They believed that life was bigger than what we could see with our eyes. But others thought that was just odd. And icky. And scary.

Questions began to be raised in the communities of faith. Should we go underground? Should we hide? Blend in, act like them? Would it be safer to pretend we aren't saved by grace through faith? Should we act as though we weren't asked to pray for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because it's risky and darned hard? The question was, "Should our faith move inside: inside our heads, inside our hearts?" Should it be a personal faith that keeps us safe and warm where it really matters in the imaginations of our inner life?

This was the question Peter set out to answer in this letter. OK, let's be aware that there are some who don't think this letter was actually written by Peter. "The timing is wrong," they say; "the vocabulary doesn't sound like a Galilean fisherman. Besides, his name was Simon, not Peter." OK, I get that. And they're probably right. But doesn't it sound like something Peter would do? If he didn't write it, then maybe he said it, and later someone wrote it down and put his name on it. If he did write it, I'm sure he did it without a sense of irony.

If the question "should we hide" is the one being addressed, who better than Peter to answer it? Peter, who professed his loyalty to his Lord with moral conviction and then ran like a scared bunny when things

got heated. Peter, who claimed his steadfastness with loud protests and then claimed to not know who they were talking about when someone asked him about this Jesus. Of course, Peter would answer this question. He's been there. He understands the pull to save one's own skin. He has a grasp on reality; he knows what will work and what won't. He's as pragmatic as they come. So, who better? What do you say, Peter? Stay safe? By no means.

We'd need to study the whole letter to get all the answer, but we can catch a glimpse of Peter's spirit even in these opening verses. A new birth, that's our gift. A new life not based on our merits, not earned by the sweat of our brows, but by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And now that gift is ours. And nothing can diminish it. Nothing can snatch it out of our grasp. But it is ours. As sure as the air we breathe. As sure as the light we see. As sure as the hope in our hearts. It is ours, this gift of life. This way of seeing ourselves and all of creation around us. It is ours.

There is only one response to that. Only one. Rejoice. Psalm 16 tells us the same thing, that in God there is joy. That joy is found in obedience, in finding our place in the kin-dom, in following the counsel, in living into the instruction. All this is about living joy day by day, trusting in the constant presence of God and the blessings of fullness that we find in relationship with the creator. "Therefore, my heart is glad and my soul rejoices."

Yes, of course, rejoice. And there are times when I can rejoice. Times when things are going well, and I can contemplate the fullness of the promise of eternity. Then, yes, I can look inward and rejoice; feel good about what has been given, content. Satisfied. "Uh, no," says Peter, grinning in his beard. "You rejoice, even if now for a little while you suffer." Wait, what? Rejoice while suffering? That doesn't compute. "I know, right?" says Peter. "But yeah, it really does. Here's the thing, you're alive." I know, and I'd like to stay that way. "No, alive. Not just living. You're alive, which means that anything that happens is just a moment in eternity. Just a blip on the screen. So, all those things that terrify you don't mean anything. They can't diminish you; they can't break you. You're alive. I didn't get that then. I get it now. All there is is love."

Peter laughs at his own thoughts. "Sounds like a pop song, doesn't it? But it's the truth. The deep truth. Love that starts with him, the one I turned my back on, but who never turned his back on me. Love of him who loves so deeply it shakes you to the core. Love so profound we are remade. Made alive. Call it salvation; that's the only word that fits. We are being saved by his love; saved to love as he loves. Saved to live as he lived. Does that sound like a party or what?"

His teeth gleam through that tangle of a beard, weathered face wrinkling around his eyes as he reaches out with those big fisherman hands to slap you on the back. "Welcome to the party," he shouts a little too loudly. "Rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." Amen, Peter, amen.

Third Sunday of Easter - Loosening the Bonds

April 23, 2023

[Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19](#); [1 Peter 1:17-23](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

Today is a day for testimony. We need to remind ourselves and one another that we have indeed been set free. Maybe we can talk about what we've been set free from. Maybe we talk about obstacles overcome. But the simple fact of freedom is what we focus on today. The more compelling part of the story ought to be what happens after you have been set free.

Notice all the past tense, completed action in both the epistle and in the psalm. "You were ransomed" and "you have come to trust in God" and "you have been purified" and "you have loosed my bonds." All of this talks about what has already happened; and a part of what we do when we come together to worship is to celebrate this freedom, to give thanks for this blessing, and to live out this purification by living in love together. So, tell your story. Find ways to hear the stories of those in your community you don't hear from often enough. Remember together so that you can worship together. Once you deal with what has happened, what you have been given already, then you can talk about response.

The future tense of the psalm is all about response. You have loosed my bonds; therefore, I will lift the cup of salvation; therefore I will pay my vows to God. Peter tells us that since we were ransomed, we will set our faith and hope in God. Because we have been purified by grace, we can love one another. We remember and we respond. That's worship today.

We also need to remember the author of all this giftedness, what Jesus has done for us. Our celebration today is remembering what Jesus has done and who he is. Peter walks through this for us and with us. Let there be a time of declaration of faith in Jesus. What songs can we sing that lift up the Resurrected one? What prayers can we pray that embrace this person and the work he has already done in us individually and collectively? My hope is built on nothing less. All hail the power of Jesus' name. What a testimony for this day!

We tell his story, and we tell our story. That is what worship is today. That is what we bring and what we offer today—because we have been set free.

PREACHING NOTES

The psalmist tells us that our bonds have been loosed. Peter says that we were ransomed from the futile ways of our ancestors. Salvation is a given, they seem to be arguing. It is a gift and was done by God's action, not ours. Specifically, Peter says, through the precious blood of Christ. This means that our emphasis is not on how to get saved, at least this week, but rather, for what are we saved. What will we do with this freedom that has been given to us?

Granted, we could also spend some time talking about what we are saved from. What is this futility that Peter speaks of, for example? What are the snares of death that the psalmist mentions in Psalm 116? And is the salvation of Psalm 116 the same as the salvation of 1 Peter 1? This would make a fascinating Bible study and is certainly worth considering for conversation and for deeper understanding. But is it

the proclamation we want to make on this third Sunday of Easter? Is it the good news that needs to be given and heard on this day?

Maybe it is; in your context, there may be many who are seeking such information. The texts, however, focus not on the fact of being saved but on the result. What happens because our bonds have been loosed? What are we ransomed to do? Or perhaps better, not the result, but the response. That's what we need to consider together. What is our response to being set free?

At the risk of being cliché, three responses seem to be called for in our texts for this week. Still haven't found the poem, though (😊). Let's start with **remember**. A part of our response to being set free is to remember what life was like before we experienced this freedom. The psalmist recites the journey, the state that caused the poet to call out the name of the Lord. This might seem relatively minor, and our inclination is often to say, "Let's move on, look ahead, don't spend time looking back. The whole looking back thing is what caused so much trouble for the Exodus journey. If they had learned to let the past be the past, then they could have got on with following God, and maybe it wouldn't have taken them forty years!"

A good argument, to be sure—except what was happening in the wilderness wandering was not remembering but waxing nostalgic. They weren't remembering what it was really like when they were slaves in Egypt; they were creating a false reality that sounded so much better than it really was. We often have that trouble with history; we want to view it through rose-colored glasses and think that it was some sort of golden age for everyone, when, in fact, it wasn't.

The call to remember as a response to our salvation is a call to be honest about where we've been and where we've come from. It is also an opportunity to ask forgiveness, not just from the God who has showered us with grace, but from the people we have hurt, or neglected, or overlooked. It is an opportunity for us to embrace some humility and some empathy for those who don't know yet what we know about being set free. We remember in order to keep our feet on the ground, to keep an honest perspective about who we are and how we are not really the authors of the good story our life is turning into. We remember so that we can embrace the other two responses to our freedom.

The response of the psalmist is perhaps the clearest. Because we remember that the Lord heard our cry and God loosed our bonds, we will praise. **Praise** is the second thing that we will do in response to our salvation. The end of Psalm 116 is an act of worship mingled with a way of living one's life in all its power and grace and joy. There is exuberance in these verses that cannot be denied. It's important to not skip over that joy. There is praise and there is praise. Too often, we give God praise because it is in the script (or the bulletin or projected on the screen) for us to do so. The psalmist goes to great lengths to offer this praise as a response to what has been done in the life of the one who sings the praise.

Another noteworthy element of praise is that it is both private and public. We too often individualize our response to God. We call it a private matter, just between me and God. Well, the scriptural witness is that faith and our response to God are never intended to be a private matter. In fact, the sign that our faith and devotion to God is real and true and deep in our lives is that we are willing and able and unrelentless in sharing our joy or offering our praise in the whole community of faith. There is a corporate component to our worship that is an essential element to the expression of faith. "Not neglecting to meet together," says the writer of Hebrews (10:25) in calling us to be the body that we are called to be.

This leads nicely to the third response that our texts suggest. Peter is keen to point out in these verses just what has been done for us—about the lengths Christ went for us and the cost that was paid, about the new start that has been given, and the new life that this affords. But his reference to the response is so brief as to be easily overlooked. “Now that you have purified your souls by obedience to the truth so that you have mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). In other words, all that has been done for you and in you is, in essence, to fill you with love that comes from God; therefore, let it come out!

Peter argues that the only response to being ransomed by love is to **love in return**; to love extravagantly, he says, and love deeply, and love in service and in attitude and in presence. We are set free in order to love. Of course, it could be argued that loving puts us back into some sort of bondage; loving makes demands on us, on our time and energy, on our resources and activity, on our attitudes and interactions. And that would be accurate. But the deeper truth is that the new creation that we have become is one of loving responders to the grace within us. We are not free to hate because of the obligation this new life has laid upon us. We are not free to hold grudges because we have been born anew of imperishable seed, Peter argues. We are set free to love, genuinely and deeply, not out of obligation or routine.

Remember, praise and love in return: that is the schemata of response that is outlined in our texts for this week. The bonds have been loosed, so we can remember who we were, give thanks to the God who loved us into life, and love one another with a powerful transforming love. It is a high calling, but a deep privilege and joy.

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Guardian of the Soul

April 30, 2023

[Psalm 23](#); [1 Peter 2:19-25](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

How many ways can we present the 23rd Psalm? Let's sing it; let's pray it; let's read it; let's recite it together. So many know this psalm and love it; it is a heart song for many of us. Lean into it. Ask the youth to rewrite it; ask the older adults to reinterpret it. Find different ways of living into this psalm. But why? Why do these six verses speak so profoundly to us and become something we want to hold on to? Partly because it is simple and easy to remember. But more significantly, it speaks to a longing deep within all of us: the desire to be at home. To be loved and protected and safe and filled; that's what this psalm speaks of to us.

1 Peter presents the guardian of our souls as the one who brings us back together, who brings us home. We celebrate that guardian today, the one who walked through the world and showed us what a life of meaning and purpose looked like. We embrace that model and aspire to the attributes that the epistle outlines for us. That kindness and honesty and purity appeals to us and inspires us. We lift up this person in worship, not just to admire but to pledge to emulate. We honor who he was so that we can learn to be like him as he was. Our prayers are not only adoration but also confession and commitment.

How do we celebrate the guardian? Some of it is praise, of course. But some of it is description. And we describe the attributes of this guardian best through sightings of the work of the Christ among us. When have you experienced the guardian of your soul? That's the story we need to share. When have you acted as the guardian of souls for others? That's the story we need to share. We celebrate God in the abstract, but we more powerfully celebrate the God at work among us and through us. "We know it is true because it is in the Bible" is one way to present God to the congregation. And that is a powerful and effective way, let's be clear. But "we know it is true because it is happening among us and in us" is also a powerful and effective way to present God to one another and the world.

Maybe this week is an opportunity to experience this guardian of the soul as we worship together. An invitation to gather at the Communion rail, for example, could allow folks to surround one another with support and prayers. We can sense that the community does care for us and for what is going on in our lives. There could be a time of anointing for healing or support. What signs can you give those who worship with you that there is a guardian who works through the community? What signs can you give those who worship with you online? How can you use the chat feature, if there is one, or the comment feature to receive and respond to those individuals and their concerns or joys?

Some of us have had a direct and even mystical experience of that guardian. But more of us have felt that guardian through the words and actions of the community that surrounds us. Can we give space for those experiences to be shared during worship as we gather this week?

PREACHING NOTES

On the one hand, talking about suffering is easy. Everyone has experience with suffering. On the other hand, we struggle to talk about suffering because we often do that comparison thing and decide that our suffering isn't as bad (or maybe is worse than) other people and, therefore, we feel guilty thinking about it, or even naming what we feel as suffering. But our pain is our pain. And it is real, and it shapes who we are and how we respond to the world. That is what Peter is trying to get us to understand. How we live with suffering and how we acknowledge God's presence in our suffering is what makes us able to endure. There is a presence, a guardian of the soul, he argues, that gives us hope. That presence is one who is familiar with suffering. And the key here is not to diminish our pain by comparing it to his. Rather, the promise is that this one understands; this one has been where we are. This one walks with us into the suffering. This guardian is a close companion, not one who waits until we make it through on our own and then gives us a gold star or some other commendation. No, this one is right there with us. This one knows us. This guardian cares for us. This is why in addition to being the guardian of our souls, Jesus is the shepherd, says Peter, the fisherman.

We understand shepherd, even though most of us are somewhat removed from the sheepherding business. We're familiar with that image, though. We've heard sermons and seen images of Jesus as the shepherd. We get it. And in large part, we get it because of a guy named David.

You know David, Old Testament guy, king of Israel, war hero, builder of palaces, writer of psalms. A lot of psalms get attributed to David. The truth is, we don't really know how many or which ones were actually written by David and which ones were just attributed to him - meaning someone else put his name on them to get them published!

But I like to think that this one, our text for this week, was one that David wrote—something he plucked out on a lazy afternoon as he looked after the sheep. It was just a little ditty that he couldn't even get his brothers to listen to when he got back to the homestead that evening. "Hey, guys, I wrote a new psalm. Listen to this." Moans and hand gestures abound, and the brothers scatter to the four winds. Even old Jesse wouldn't listen. "It's real short, Dad," David whines, "it'll just take a sec." "Maybe later, Davey, I still got work to do, and you know how your mother gets when we are late for supper." And he scoots out the back door, making sure the screen door doesn't slam behind him because he gets heck for that every single time.

With a sigh, David glances at the old sheepdog curled up in front of the fire who doesn't lift his head but does manage a wag that thumps against the floor. That's all the encouragement David needs, and he pulls his lyre off his back and says to the dog, "It's my best so far. It's gonna be a big hit; I just feel it in my bones." And he starts to sing.

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 right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 my whole life long.

The final note seems to hang in the air like a spark ascending from a warming fire. David senses that he isn't as alone as he thought when he began to sing. He sees his mom come in from the kitchen, wiping her eyes on that calico apron she's worn to prepare more meals than anyone can remember. She flashes him a proud smile before she scoots back to her stirring and baking. The brothers, who sought an escape from yet another psalm of David, now seem mesmerized, caught up to another place as they bump into each other as they drift out of the room. Even Jesse seems at a loss for words; he opens and closes his big farmer hands as though grasping for words that are out of reach. "Davey," he croaks with a voice filled with unusual emotion. But still at a loss for a way to name the moment, he instead clears his throat and heads out to wash up for supper, the pump handle creaking in the silence made by the new song.

David turns back to the only one unaffected by the event: the old dog, tail stilled, basking in the warmth, tilts his eyes toward David and seems to say, "It's better in the King James version."

Well, that's how I imagine it anyway. How could he know those six verses would become the single most remembered part of scripture around the world? But maybe he sensed it even as he wrote it. Or as it came to him in that curious process called inspiration. In-spirit-ed. A human/divine encounter that left us with six verses that speak to deep places in our souls. A psalm about wanting; or wanting and having. Or having so much, being so filled, that wanting doesn't even enter the picture anymore.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Not because wanting is bad, but because there is nothing to want anymore. The Twenty-Third Psalm speaks of a someday when the deepest longings, the strongest wantings are satisfied by a relationship with the divine, with something bigger than anything our minds can comprehend. We call that something "Father" because we want it to be as real as those strong arms that wrap around us when the storm begins to rage around us. We want it to be like that guiding hand that helps us see the world right in front of our face, but because of our fear or our ignorance or our selfishness, we can't see it. Until those strong and patient and infinitely loving hands take pains to point it out to us.

In the meantime, we want. And because we live in a world of amazing resources, we can be convinced that this thing or that can fill that aching need. And if we just had one of those; if we just looked like her, or drove a car like him, or dressed like those folks, then our wanting would be done. Except it isn't. The fixes that the world offer are always short term. They might last a while, but then we need to upgrade. Then we need the next new thing. Or then we discover that the features of our current thing don't include satisfaction or contentment despite the advertising telling us otherwise.

Our solution, we think, is to settle. Settle for less. Be satisfied being half empty. Be content with a vacancy in significant places. Learn to live with what is. Good enough is good enough. But that's not what the Twenty-Third Psalm says either. It talks of banquet tables; it talks of overflowing cups; it talks of peace and of being pursued by goodness and mercy. It talks about not wanting, not because you've trained yourself not to want, but because you are filled up to the top and spilling over.

Yes, some of it is learning to want properly. But mostly, it is being so filled up with love and support and care that you can't imagine what could possibly be better than that.

Fifth Sunday of Easter - Like Living Stones

May 7, 2023

[Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#); [1 Peter 2:2-10](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

“You are my rock.” How many songs can we sing about the rock of our faith? Lots, no doubt. So, sing them, but also bring a rock to hand out to everyone who gathers. Email a rock to the online congregation. Wait, email a rock? Maybe a picture of a rock. Maybe a link to a rock song on Spotify. Figure out how to make rocks – everyday rocks that we see so often we don’t see them anymore – the center of our attention. Let the everyday items around us suddenly reverberate with divinity. It’s not just a rock anymore; it is a reminder of God’s presence and promise.

That’s what worship can do: transform everything around us so that God becomes visible to our too earthly eyes. Find something that can symbolize that presence. This week, it is easy, Peter talks about stones, about being stones, living stones. Psalm 31 talks about the rock that is the Lord supporting us, encouraging us. We are the stone; God is the rock, hmmm. What this means is that the best sign, the best symbol of God’s presence is you, is us, the whole body of Christ.

There is also in this text an invitation to surrender to the direction of the Spirit as we are being built into the structure that is the body of Christ. So, here again, there is an opportunity for a commitment or recommitment to the working of God in and through us. This could be done corporately as an affirmation of faith or unison prayer of commitment; or individually, as people come forward for an opportunity to commit to the building of the body and the kin-dom of God. Come forward and pick up a stone, perhaps, or leave one to build a model of the church that rises up to God. Use some way of signaling our obedience to the call to let ourselves be built.

But we are living stones, so what does that mean? How do we carry this foundational presence out into the world? How do we commit to building a church that transforms not just those inside, but those outside as well? How will our body-building strengthen our whole neighborhood and not just ourselves? This is the challenge of the living stones: discipleship for the transformation of the world.

PREACHING NOTES

It was done. At last, it was completed. It wasn’t all that long ago that our daughter, our youngest, finished college and started a life on her own, apart from us. We were there to watch her graduate. We saw it done. She walked across the stage, shook various hands, tried to get her service dog in training to shake at least one hand (but the dog wasn’t interested), got the big white envelope, and smiled for the camera. And with that, it was done. Of course, it was done. Of course. We planned for this day. We were waiting for that day. And then it was here. And then it was gone. Just like that. Gone. Hard to believe, frankly. Hard. Like a stone. A stone in the gut, weighing you down. Sadness in a way, that it’s over. Gone. In a blink of an eye. A stone skipping across a quiet pond, making ripples that disappear, even as the stone sinks out of sight. Gone.

What am I saying? It was a good day. A bright sunshiny day. We were proud to watch her walk across those stones set into the ground forming the platform on which they all stood, they all passed. Built up into something new, something more. The horizon was clear; the future was bright. She stood on those stones and launched herself into a new tomorrow. I couldn't have been prouder.

It wasn't easy— getting that far, crossing that threshold. It wasn't easy for her or for us, just as it wasn't easy for her brother the previous year. There were rocks in the road, stones on the path; there were trips that made us fall, stumbles that bruised us. But we kept walking. They kept walking forward, over the stones and into ... what? More stones?

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5 NRSV).

As a nod to Mother's Day next week, I guess, Peter starts with milk, with feeding, with infancy and nurture, with tasting and seeing. What mother doesn't remember those struggles and those joys? Be sure to say "Happy Mother's Day" to all those who help us drink the spiritual milk, who help us grow in faith. We are grateful. We are better for it, for you. But that's next week.

And it's the stones that dominate the thinking in these verses. Come to the stone, and be a stone, and live inside those stones. Peter gets a little carried away, it seems. Stones on the brain, I guess. Rocks. Rocky, that's what they called him. Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter (*Petros* - Rock). Maybe he's trying to return the favor. Come to the living stone. Come and let him build you into the house he's trying to build. Be a stone, like him. A living stone. Part of the foundation. Part of the structure. Be a stone, a temple made of stone. Be a stone sanctuary; let worship take place in you. Make worship take place in you. We're both the structure and the activity that takes place inside that structure. We're the building and the worship that inhabits that building. It makes your head spin a little bit. Which is it? What is it? What are we; who is he; and what in the world is a living stone? If living water is water that moves, water that bubbles and rushes and flows, what is a living stone?

The psalmist wants to talk about stones too—maybe living, but more importantly, strong, and constant. And protective. A refuge. "You are my rock," the psalmist sings, "and my fortress." There is a commitment here: "Into your hand I commit my spirit." I'm putting everything I have in this rocky refuge. My times are in your hand." My past and my future, not to mention my present, which sounds a bit shaky right now. Why else would the singer want to hide, want to run, want to be covered up?

And yes, a living stone, because there is a desire for action. This isn't just a hiding place; this isn't just a mountain cave to hide in, a rocky fortress to duck into. No, "rescue me," the song says, "take me out of the net that is hidden for me." I've fallen into a trap and need saving. Was it my fault? Was it the fault of the enemies? Well, that's not important now, is it? Just get me out! "Deliver me from the hand of my enemies and my persecutors."

Save me. While I sit back and watch you work. Is that the approach, the attitude we express when calling on the rock and refuge? Well, Peter says no. Peter says that this is not a "get out of the way and let God work" kind of thing. He wants to talk more about a partnership. Not of equals, to be sure. A partnership of consent, however. We need to want it; we need to allow it; we need to seek it out. Our task, Peter

argues, is to invite the Spirit to use us. The potential is within us – “we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” But the Spirit waits for our consent. The Spirit waits for us to be willing participants in the building of the kin-dom, the construction of the community of faith. “Let yourself be built into a spiritual house.”

“Let yourself be built,” Peter pleads with us. Let yourself—not decide for yourself. I’m going here; I’m gonna hold up this wall; I’m going to frame that window; I’m going to lie on this path. No, let yourself be built. Go where God wants you, where the Spirit can use you. You’re not in charge; you’re a stone, for heaven’s sake! You’re not the architect; you’re building material. Be built into something greater than yourself, something you may not even see right now. Who knows what you will be? He’s not done with you yet.

Not done. There was a finality to that day in the sun at Wittenberg University. A door closing, a chapter ending. It felt done. But I must tell you a secret and a contentious one, at that. Maddie defied her parents (again), and she and a few girlfriends went to celebrate finishing their schoolwork by getting a tattoo. We didn’t want her to get the tattoo. We told her not to. That’s a door that closed, I suppose. What are you going to do? Let it be the end?

It’s a tiny thing, tucked behind her ear. It’s a semicolon and a plus sign. It says there’s more; more to her. More for her. There’s more. That’s why we’re living stones, I suspect, and why he is a living stone too. Just when you think you’ve nailed him down, he pops up again. Just when you think you’ve buried him deep, rolled the dead stone over him, he lives. Again. There is more. More to him. More to you. More to me. More to her.

I want to see what’s next.

Sixth Sunday of Easter - Always Be Ready

May 14, 2023

[Psalm 66:8-20](#); [1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

What are we supposed to be ready to do? Tell our story! It's as simple as that. And it's as complicated as that. Peter says that we are always "ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15 NRSV.) But what does that mean, and who demands such an account these days? This is where we learn to interpret opportunities. We aren't often in danger of going to jail on account of our faith; we aren't likely to lose our jobs or get kicked out of school, at least in most parts of the world. So, we look for opportunities to tell our story when questions are asked. When we are asked about our Sunday morning habits, for example, or why giving is so important to us. Questions like these are great opportunities to share faith and to tell our story, if we are prepared.

So, how do we get prepared to tell our story? This might be something for a workshop or a class, but worship can also be a chance to practice our responses. Testimony is a long-standing tradition in the life of the church and might be worth considering reviving in your local context. We need to hear from one another so that we can become more comfortable speaking to others. We may think our story isn't dramatic enough for a testimony, or that we aren't always confident in the motivations or reasons for why we do what we do. The drama of daily living is enough, and confidence grows as we practice and examine our stories well enough to tell.

Easter tide is for reflecting on the impact of the Risen Christ on our lives day by day. What does this good news mean for us in how we live, what we choose, and what we value? Psalm 66 could be read as an outline for telling our story. We might begin with what has happened to us, what struggles we have faced, or what journeys we have taken. Then we speak of our encounter with the Risen Christ or the presence of the Spirit, and then we follow with the decisions we made because of this encounter. Then we issue an invitation. "Come and hear," says the psalmist.

Worship can encourage us to speak and give us examples and opportunities to tell our stories. It can be a celebration of who we are and how Christ is at work in our lives. This is practice for speaking beyond these walls and beyond this moment. Always be ready.

PREACHING NOTES

Do you want a list? "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" Well, Peter, I can probably give you a list. That verse seems a little naïve, don't you think? People are hurt trying to do good all the time. Think of aid workers in times of war, or those trying to help the hurting in totalitarian regimes, or those attempting to stand up against injustice even in representative democracies who suffer persecution and misrepresentation on a regular basis. We could come up with a list.

But then maybe Peter is aware of all of that, which is why he moves on from verse 13 and immediately says, "but even if you do suffer for doing what is right" in the very next verse. Maybe he is more aware

of the world in which we live than it seems at first. And of course, he is. If this is Peter, or represents something of Peter's thinking and example, then, yes, he does understand a complicated world. He goes on to say, "Don't live in fear; don't hesitate to do good; don't let the threats cause you to not do what you know your faith calls you to do and to be." "Always be ready to make your defense" is a powerful statement about the need to be overt Christians in a world that has become cynical, let alone, dangerous.

What a challenge given to us, to the church, to be prepared to speak, to give account for the hope within us. It is a call to not be quiet, to not keep things under our hats, but to live out loud in a way that draws attention to what we are doing and who we are and most importantly to why we do what we do. This is a call to evangelism, to knocking on doors and telling our story. True, it says, "give a defense to anyone who demands an account." Some see that as an out. As long as no one asks me, I don't have to say a word. Well, we could also argue that the world is demanding an account all the time. Certainly, the brokenness of the world demands an account; the emptiness of the world demands an account. The hunger of the world demands an account. We believe that we have what the world needs. How dare we keep it to ourselves?

Now, Peter is quick to tell us how we go about doing this. We don't do it with anger; we don't do it with force and annoyance, with tricks and sleight of hand. No, do it with gentleness and reverence, he writes. And tell the honest truth, as you know it. Don't make up stuff or you will get caught out, says Peter. Maybe that's because he has some personal experience with that. Don't say you're brave when you aren't. Don't say you won't run when you will. Don't say you are perfect when you and probably everyone else knows you are the chief of sinners. Sorry, that was Paul. But you get the point. Peter says we speak with integrity. We speak as those who did not deserve the grace by which we live, but who were baptized into a new life, a new way of living. We speak as those who are being made into disciples of Jesus Christ, not as those who have finished our labors. We were under the condemnation of death, Peter writes, and Jesus came and set us free. That is the context from which we speak, from which we give an account of the hope within us. Not by our own merits or our own goodness, but by the grace of God in Christ.

The psalmist in Psalm 66 tells a similar story. But instead of suffering, the psalm speaks of being tested as silver is tested. Indeed, the psalm speaks of all sorts of difficulties and struggles as having a divine origin. Yet, the attitude of the writer is not one of frustration or anger but understanding and a willingness to praise. Rather than casting blame, the psalm suggests that there is no human experience that is outside of the will of God. There is nothing that can or does happen to us that is a sign that God has abandoned us. In the end, we could argue that the witness here is that God is present even in difficult times. Our understanding of the activity of God in our lives is different from that of the writers of Hebrew scriptures, which is why it sounds odd or even uncomfortable to us. For the psalmist to say that God laid the burdens and God let the people ride over their heads is the good news of God's presence in the midst of pain and suffering.

The result of this understanding is that the writer will speak of God's goodness. The psalmist will "tell what God has done for me." Like Peter's call, Psalm 66 says we must be always ready to make a defense for the hope that lies within. And given the difficulties faced, there is no doubt that there will be those who will ask, "How can you still have hope?" So, "come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what God has done for me."

But notice one more thing about this telling. Nowhere does it ask us to count the numbers who believe us. Nowhere is there supposed to be a measuring of the response to the words that are spoken. Psalm 66 tells us that God has listened. In the end, that is the audience for whom we speak. That is the measure of our faithfulness. Not how many “souls we have saved.” Not the crowds we drew or the attention we gathered. In fact, it may seem like no one at all is responding, is turning their lives around, is making any change based on our words. That doesn’t matter in the least. Yes, of course, we hope to make a difference in the world around us; we hope to bring influence for the cause of Christ and to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world. But in the end, our audience is God. Our measuring rod is faithfulness to the call of God. God will take care of the response. Our task is to always be ready to give a defense to anyone who sees the hope within us.

Seventh Sunday of Easter - Casting Your Cares

May 21, 2023

[Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35](#); [1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11](#)

Color: White or Gold

PLANNING NOTES

If you are one of those who believe that worship should leave you feeling lighter, unburdened, and set free, then this is the week for you. “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7 NRSV). What could be better than that? In a text that is full of an admission of suffering and a call to discipline, to hear the call to cast anxiety away is a monumental ask, yet a powerful gift and promise. Peter is telling us that it is about perspective. He isn’t saying the problems will go away. But he is inviting us to not let the suffering control us. Cast your inclination to worry away. Trust in the Lord because he cares for you. What a blessing and a promise!

This leads, of course, to praise. Psalm 68 is inviting us sing praise to God’s name, to sing of this care for those seemingly without power and place in society, to sing of the homeless finding shelter, of the setting free those unjustly imprisoned, of the earth itself being blessed with life-giving rain. Sing of the goodness of God at work through the service and witness of the church at work in the world. We are singing God’s story as it intertwines with our story. We are singing of promise even in difficult times. And we are singing a reminder that none of us have to face our suffering alone. We are surrounded and supported by the caring God experienced in the loving community of faith.

There needs to be a releasing moment, a casting moment in worship this week. We often need physical actions to support our spiritual realities. Is this an altar call time, or a prayer station where we can write down a worry or anxiety that we want to let go of and cast it away? Do we do this corporately or individually, in a time of confession and assurance or in silence? How do we invite worshipers to truly get the sense of letting go of something, or handing over something so that it burdens them no longer?

Be aware that the mood of both the epistle text and the psalm is one of joy. Yes, we are talking about serious things, suffering and enemies and difficulties aplenty. But the call is to know and experience joy in the depths of our being, even while we wrestle. Because that is the sign of faith, the sign of trusting in the one who cares for us. Make space for the expression of exuberant joy on this final week of Eastertide as we embrace the promise of the Risen Lord.

PREACHING NOTES

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7 NRSV). How many times have you heard that? How many times have you said it, or something like it? Leave your worries at the foot of the cross, for example. Give it over to Jesus. There are lots of different ways to say this fairly simple idea. We hear it and say it all the time. But here’s the real question – “How do you do it?” Or even – “Can we do it?” Is such a thing humanly possible?

Well, of course it is. We wouldn’t be presented with a task that is beyond human capabilities. God isn’t in the frustration business. Where do such questions come from? From years of experience. Casting our cares onto Jesus – even knowing, as we do, that he cares for us – is an extremely difficult task. Especially

when Peter does such an amazing job of describing the human condition in such terrorizing detail. From fiery ordeals to facing a lion prowling around looking for someone to devour, yikes! Sure, it feels like that on a regular basis, but seeing it there in print makes me want to cling to those fears even more tightly. They are real; they are overwhelming; and they are mine. So, how are we supposed to just cast them aside? It sounds like we're slacking or irresponsible somehow. Like we're each a budding Scarlett O'hara, not wanting to think about that today; I'll think about it tomorrow.

We aren't being given a pass to ignore the problems that beset us and surround us. This isn't really about disengagement and living blissfully ignorant of all that is wrong. This isn't a way of avoiding responsibility or saying as so many do, "That's not my problem." For sure, some "thats" are not your problems, but others are. What do we do with those? Cast them off too?

Digging a little deeper, we find a number of things in the text from 1 Peter that might help us understand what he is calling us to do and understand. The word that in so many translations is rendered as "anxiety," but in the King James Version as "care" is, in fact, singular. So, when we say, "Cast your cares," we are mistranslating the suggestion – or command – from the text. Oh, so we must select one? We get a pass on one care, but the rest of them we have to keep wrestling with? Or Jesus can handle only one problem at a time, one petition per prayer?

What if we took a different interpretation of that word? What if it wasn't the individual problem or each care that besets us and instead it is our approach to these problems? What if we translated "Cast all your caring on him" or "set aside your tendency to become anxious about each problem that you face"? This doesn't make any of the issues disappear, but it does equip you for a response. It gives you the freedom to look for options and ultimately to trust that with God, all things are possible. Peter isn't suggesting that we should stop caring; the verse itself speaks of how much Jesus cares. He suggests instead that we should stop worrying. He is remembering, no doubt, when Jesus said the very same thing: "Do not be anxious."

Psalm 68 gives us a model of how to cast our anxiety onto the one who cares for us. It starts as many psalms do – and as we often do ourselves – with complaint, or anger, or frustration with all the bad things that surround us too often. But the psalm quickly moves to a different mode, as if casting aside those attitudes and feelings. "But let the righteous rejoice." It's that "but" that's important, it seems. There is a choice and not a both/and. But let's let that go and move into joy instead.

How do we get into joy? We start by describing God and then what God has done and is doing for us and with us and through us. When we focus on what is right and on what is good, then what is broken begins to lose its power to define life as we know it. And if we can't see the good, can't see God at work around us, then look again and look deeper, we might be surprised. Start by rehearsing the history of God's work with God's people; read the stories in the scripture texts; read the history of the church and the history of your church. Prepare to be amazed and to be moved to praise. Then look again at your own life and your own community of faith. What is going right? Where is healing brought? Where is hope rekindled? Where are the hungry fed and poor lifted up? When we know how God is described in the story of the people of God, then we will recognize the presence of God when we see it at work around us and in us. Or through us. Maybe if you can't see it, you need to start by asking what you are doing to reveal God's presence.

Once we've cast our tendency to be anxious on the one who tells us not to worry, then acting like we can be the sign of God's presence by how we live our lives becomes possible. Once we let go of what we're afraid of, of what could go wrong, and grab hold of what the vision of the kin-dom calls us to do and be, then we find that we and everyone around stops wondering what God is doing these days. And we become instruments of praise and rejoicing. Cast your anxiety, because the Lord cares for you.