

# Chosen & Precious

The Resurrected One is chosen and precious. This is a series about Christ, about the one we call Lord, the one we follow, the one we obey. It is also a series about us—our identity is in Christ, and we are blessed in that hope.

Week 1 – [1 Peter 2:2-10](#)

“Like Living Stones”

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“Showing the Glory of Christ in Us”

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Week 1 – [1 Peter 2:2-10](#)

“Like Living Stones”

May 10

## INTRODUCTION

We begin a new series this week. And while this week we continue with the epistle, we won't stick with that. We're jumping around in this series: an epistle, a psalm, and a Gospel reading, just to keep things interesting. The common theme is a phrase that comes from 1 Peter: “Chosen and Precious.” As you'll see from the Preaching Notes, this phrase is about Jesus. Jesus is the one rejected by human beings, but chosen and precious in God's sight. It is not a misuse of the text or the phrase to claim that in Christ we are all chosen and precious. So, this series is about Jesus and about us. It's a celebration of the gift of Resurrection and the new life that it brings to us and to the world.

We begin the series on that slippery slope of a Sunday called Mother's Day. It sometimes feels like a no-win situation for worship planning teams. Some might argue, “Who would begrudge giving thanks for mothers?” Well, perhaps no one would begrudge it, but the minefield is treacherous. There are people in most congregations whose experience with their mothers wasn't positive. There is always the risk of evoking painful memories with such an emphasis. Those who have been abandoned by mothers, abused by mothers, or neglected by mothers would struggle during a Mother's Day worship experience.

Then there are those who have had trouble becoming mothers despite the aching in their hearts. Problems of infertility are delicate issues and are often hidden in the congregation. Mothers who have lost a child could also struggle on Mother's Day. You see the problem?

Then there are theological considerations as well. Too often a Mother's Day service becomes worship of mothers or motherhood rather than a thanksgiving for mothers in the worship of Jesus Christ. At times, our special observations blur the lines.

Some might dismiss these considerations as “political correctness” in overdrive. But perhaps it is, instead, pastoral respect and radical hospitality toward all.

This doesn't mean, however, that the day has to pass without recognition, nor should it. But the litany or prayer should be inclusive enough to speak to a variety of experiences of mothering – prayers for our mothers as well as prayers for those who struggle with motherhood. It is a simple way of acknowledging that the greeting card image of the perfect mother isn't the whole story. Some may have been blessed to have a perfect mother, but many others weren't so blessed.

Some congregations like to give gifts to mothers, a flower or ribbon or something simple. Perhaps the gift could be given to everyone, with the instruction to pass it on to someone who has been like a mother to them; someone who cared for them, nurtured them, healed them in some way. Celebrate someone who reminds congregants that, in Christ, they too were chosen and precious.

Let this act of worship be a true celebration of life. We are in Eastertide, standing in the glow of the Resurrection, so we embrace that gift and share it. That's what parenting or mentoring does; it shares life. It shares it and shapes and enhances it by walking alongside one another, building up the body with an ongoing witness and testimony, with radical hospitality and pastoral care.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

A nod to Mother's Day, it seems, Peter starts with milk, with feeding, with infancy and nurture, with tasting and seeing. What mother doesn't remember those struggles and those joys? Happy Mother's Day to all those who help us drink the spiritual milk and help us grow in faith. We are grateful. We are better for it. Thank you.

But 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. He has 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?

“Let yourself be built,” Peter pleads with us. “Let yourself.” It’s not for us to decide, to say, “I’m going here; I’m going to 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 he wants you, where he 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.

But why living stones? Wouldn’t stones that stay put be better? Wouldn’t stones that are inert be better for building? You don’t want your stone house to be all wobbly. Or worse yet, for the stones to come to life and wander about. That is hardly a secure construction pattern.

Well, that’s why riding metaphors too long gets you into trouble. He’s not giving advice to stone masons; he is helping to build the church. He’s bought into this faith thing. God doesn’t want dead weight holding down the pews; God wants living stones who will live and move and grow in their faith. He doesn’t just want a stone who will come and hold up the corner and that’s it. He wants a stone that will look for other places to shore up the walls, will learn other methods for framing doorways and paving paths, will discover more opportunities to be a trail marker or respite giver. The uses of a stone, a living stone, are beyond counting. That’s who Christ is calling for; that’s who Christ was.

A stumbling block – now that’s something all good construction grade granite needs to aspire to, am I right? Sure, I want to be the one that stubs toes and bruises knees. Especially when they deserve it. At least that’s what Peter seems to imply. They stumble because they disobey. And they deserved it. Right? They were just bad, says Peter. We’re better. We’re royal. We’re part of God’s light show. We’re the ones who have received mercy, even though we hadn’t before and even though we were just bad. Even though we deserved it; even though . . .  
Hmm.

What if Jesus didn't come to be a stumbling block? What if instead Jesus came to be a stone bridge that leads us from where we are to where we could be, where we're called to be? Because people are clumsy and sometimes don't want to move and get satisfied with ruts, they stumble. A better way is before us, and we stumble because it might be better; but it definitely is different. Maybe destined means that as long as we follow our own inclinations, we're sunk, or limping with bruised and bloody toes. But when we receive the mercy of living differently and once we pledge allegiance to the king and not to the monuments of our own making – however good they may be or seem – then we learn to walk differently.

And Peter says, with, it seems, a certain amount of surprise and relief, that Christ chooses to let us be a part of the plan, a part of the structure to build a better kingdom. Come and be built. Come and be alive and participate in something bigger than yourself. Come and grow into something more. To be a priest is to be a go between. We can help usher someone else into a new way of living. We are privileged to partner with the king; that's why we're royal priests, not because we are special, but because he is special. We're just like the ones stubbing their toes and knocking their knees. We aren't better than they are; we're just being used for a greater cause than we even knew was out there. It is his mercy that makes us worthy of being a living stone.

And the more we can learn about what that means, the more effective and the more complete we will be. The more alive we will be. The more we are willing to set aside our own preferences and patterns for the service of the king, the more we will grow as living stones.

Week 2 – [Psalm 66:8-20](#)

“Come and Hear”

May 17

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Chosen and precious” refers to the one chosen for us and precious in God's eyes. But now, because of the Resurrection, that phrase includes us. We are chosen and precious in Christ. A consequence of being chosen is that God is at work in our

lives in good times and in difficult times. This service is perfect for celebrating the faith stories of the congregation. In the previous series, we spoke about the power of testimony. Perhaps this is a practice that should become a regular feature of worship.

Let's be clear, testimony isn't the same thing as sharing prayer concerns, nor is it necessarily about how people came to faith. Of course, it could be that, but more useful are the stories of how God is at work in the life of the disciple in training. The ability to discern God at work in our lives is a part of growth in grace, which is why we need to practice this discernment in the body on a regular basis. While spontaneous testimony can be fruitful, it runs too many risks to be a regular practice. It is better to have individuals rehearse their testimony with the pastor or worship leader to keep it focused on the question at hand. The guiding question might be as general as, "How is God working in your life right now?" or as specific as, "How was God helping you through your illness, or grief, or tragedy?"

The key is to set boundaries, to stay focused on the question, and to limit the time. This is not done as a way to confine the Holy Spirit, but to keep the subject before the congregation. This is a teaching moment as well as an opportunity to get to know one disciple's journey better. Some communities might choose to video-record the testimony in order to control the time and keep the wandering to a minimum.

Be aware, though, you might be opening a door to the movement of the Spirit in the life of the congregation. You might find more and more people wanting to come and tell their stories. You will certainly find many who want to hear more; it could become the most popular part of worship. Hearing one another's stories is compelling. This is why the psalms are so powerful; they come from the rawness of human experience and still find their way to praise (see Preaching Notes).

The text chosen for this series is Psalm 66:8-20. It is also found in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (790). Use the litany with the sung response if you can. It adds that experience of joy to the reading. Let the congregation share the reading of the scripture this week. There is honesty in these words, as you usually find in the psalms, that will connect with many as a witness to the struggles in their own lives. Let the people have a voice and find that voice. Although they are reading

ancient words, they are telling their own stories. It is a story that doesn't end in suffering, but in praise.

It is important that we find our way to praise in the "Chosen and Precious" series. We are not elevating the individual to become an object of worship. We are entering into the lives of the individuals in the community to help find the way to the praise of God. No matter how deeply you share in the struggles of those who are willing to speak, there needs to be hope that rises to the fore. There needs to be joy that results from the confident awareness that God is present, even in the darkest times.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

Let's talk about testing. Psalm 66 is a great psalm of thanksgiving, and it can even point to joy (see psalter, *UM Hymnal* 790, especially the sung response) In many ways, it is easy to preach. It is a true celebration of the goodness of God – except for that pesky bit about being tested.

Our assigned text starts so well: "Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip." Wonderful! It is a hymn to the presence and protection of God, who guards us from the hazards of living, keeps our feet on the path of righteousness. Who wouldn't want to preach that?

But then it takes a turn in the very next verse: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried." Wait, what? The same God who kept our feet from slipping now tests us? It gets worse: "You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water . . ." Um. Really? Protector God?

Certainly, we can imagine our lives being caught up in all those things. We've been through fire; we've been through water; we've had people riding over our heads more often than we'd like to admit. We've even had our net moments where we felt trapped by anything and everything. So, it isn't necessarily the content of the struggles that gives us pause; it is the fact that God is the author of our pain. "For you, O God, have tested us." So, let's talk about testing.

What do we envision when we read what the psalmist writes? What comes to mind when we want to talk about the testing that God gives to us? For many, it means a somewhat arbitrary bolt from above where the old man with a long beard decides on a whim to afflict us with some sort of test. God just draws our name out of the divine hat or closes the holy eyes and rests a glowing finger on a name in the book of life or something. "It's our turn," we think. Maybe we did something to deserve it, or maybe it was simply random. Either way, it seems a vengeful or capricious God who would do such things.

What if the psalmist has simply reported on the struggles that had been encountered? What if it was just a catalog of difficulty? We would have sympathized and seen the common humanity, the path of shadow and suffering and known what it was to walk with such a burden. But when you add in that activity of God, it now seems like punishment.

That isn't how the psalmist saw it, however. The psalmist was simply providing a catalog of events. But the world view of the writer is that nothing happens without God having agency. It isn't written with a sense of frustration or anger; it's just cataloged and noted that God is a part of what has happened. So, there is no incongruity in the mind of the psalmist to speak of a God who doesn't let our feet slip at the same time as a God who brings us into the net. We would say, "Stuff happens" with the same state of mind that the psalmist says, "God sent stuff."

Yet, it is a test, not just stuff. It is not a test for God to see whether we will be faithful, but a test so that we can see whether we will be faithful. God doesn't need the test to know our hearts; we do. God isn't examining us but giving us the means by which we can live out our faith. Everything that happens is a test, and we rise to the occasion by responding as if we belong to God.

As an aside, we often talk about the tests as difficulties that we have to struggle through. And certainly those are tests – the negative medical report, the loss of a loved one, or of a job, a financial crisis, a relationship in trouble. All these and more are often seen as testing our faith. We need to include, however, the good things on the list as well. Bishop William Willimon, in a sermon to clergy, once declared that we ought to respond to good news from a member of our congregation with, "I'll be right there!" or "I'll be praying for you!"



“I just got a promotion”

“I’ll be right there.”

“I got a raise.”

“I’ll be praying for you.”

The good things we encounter are just as much a test of our faith as are the negative things. Will we continue to honor God in this time of good fortune? Will we be humble when the applause comes? Will we be faithful when we move to the top floor? Life is a test of faith.

That’s why as we coach members of the body on their testimony, the question is not, “Have things happened in your life?” Because things always happen, for good or for ill. The question is rather, “Where have you seen God at work in and through you?” The psalms are our guide here. As tragic as the story might be, and high as the emotions might run, it always returns (almost always) to praise.

“Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed steadfast love from me” (66:20).

It should turn not just to praise, but to a commitment to worship and to participate in the life of the people of God – and then, not just worship, but disciple making. “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what God has done for me” (66:16). It’s in the telling of our story, our faith story, that we engage in building up the body. We participate in making disciples.

Faith isn’t just for us. That’s part of the test. You notice the psalmist speaks in plurals. You have tried *us*, not me. You brought *us* into the net, you laid burdens on *our* backs: us, our. There is corporality to faith. There is an *us*, not so much a *me* (or rather the *me* that God wants me to be is a me in us. And that us is as wide as the world). The prophetic image is one of the whole world streaming to the mountain of the Lord.

Our calling as followers of Christ is not just to keep ourselves on the path, but to invite others to walk the same path we walk – the path of the one chosen and precious.

Week 3 – [John 17:1-11](#)

“Showing the Glory of Christ in Us”

May 24

## INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh Sunday of Easter: the final “of.” It is time to turn back to the one who is “chosen and precious,” except, as you’ll see, he turns it back to us. Even when talking about himself, his own glory, he turns back to us. It’s amazing, really. In this moment, you’d think he would be focused on himself. But even in the final moments on this earth, we’re the objects of his attention and his prayer.

We’ve chosen the Gospel text for this week, the last Sunday of Eastertide. However, some might choose to observe Ascension Day on this Sunday. The real Ascension Day is May 21 this year, the fortieth day of Easter. But since most United Methodist churches don’t have weekday services, except perhaps as alternate Sunday services, then Ascension Day gets moved to a Sunday – if it is observed at all. Ascension Day is a minor observance, at the best of times. It is part of the mystical element of Jesus, supernatural, hard to understand, hard to see how it applies to our lives. Except that it is a part of the Creed: “Ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father.”

It is part of the story of the Christ. It might not be our story, but it is his. Except, he always turns it back to us. Always. So, you could choose the Ascension Day Gospel text, [Luke 24:44-53](#), which is a retelling of the Ascension at the very end of Luke’s Gospel. There Jesus connects his story with ours as he recounts the purpose of his mission and ministry on earth. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Lk. 24:46-48). From there, he promises the Spirit to empower those who now were called to bring to fulfillment this promise, repentance and forgiveness to all nations.

There is certainly “plenty of meat on those bones,” as they say. But our recommendation is that instead you look at John’s Gospel. It would be possible for the Ascension to be a theme alongside the interpretation of that text (see Preaching Notes). But whether you choose Luke’s retelling or John’s preparation,

the theme is glory. You could even argue that the two texts present the spectrum of glory of Christ. In Luke, we have the post-Resurrection appearance and commissioning before the Christ ascends to take his place at the right hand of God the Father. In John, we have the pre-Passion Jesus about to suffer and be killed for the sins of the world, and he prays for those called to follow. Both are ends of a crucial timeline, the scope of salvation.

This Sunday's worship is about glorifying Christ, about acknowledging the depths he traversed in his mission and ministry to us, and about leaning into the heights he attained as the first born of all creation, part of the eternal God we experience/understand as Trinity. There should be celebration; there should be light and color and movement as we praise God for the glory of Christ that reflects on us and reflects through us.

And there should be prayer. Notice that Jesus talks about his glory not by talking to the disciples, but to God. He had a long discourse for the disciples, helping them understand what he was trying to do all the time he had been with them, and trying to prepare them for what was coming next. Now, in chapter 17, Jesus turns to God to pray. So, prayer should shape our worship this day. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for what Jesus has done through suffering and death and what God has done through the Resurrection. Offer prayer for the glorification of Jesus in the finishing of the work.

Then, like Jesus, our prayers go outward, including those who follow him and those who don't yet know him. Offer prayers for the church as we seek to finish the work we have been given; offer prayers for the world that is the mission field in which we work – not simply as numbers, as bodies to collect, but as precious children of God, hurting and hungry, harassed and helpless, without a shepherd to follow.

Today, worship should begin and end in prayer; and there should be prayer throughout. Use directed, printed prayers that are read in unison, as though the church has a common voice to go with the common mission. Use prayers that are sung by the congregation together or by the choir or soloist as a way of giving us words to lean into, words to hold onto, words that dive deep into our souls the way music has the capacity to do. Let there be space for silence, for the prayers of the heart, for prayers without words, for sighs too deep for words, perhaps. Find

ways to pray with your hands also. Try movement prayers, gestures that guide thoughts, or prayer stations where people can go and write or color or light candles so that the sight and sound and scent of prayer can fill the room. This is a day for praying.

The prayers are not prayers of desperation, though we may feel desperate. They are not prayers of hopelessness, though we have walked in those shadows and may be there still. These prayers are prayers of glory. They are prayers of thankfulness for the glory we have seen and the glory in which we share because we are followers of Jesus. These are prayers of those who know that when Jesus was on the brink of death, he still prayed for us, for his disciples, for those present and those to come. He prayed that they might be one with him and with one another.

Add prayers for unity. Those prayers are sorely needed today in our church and in our nation and in the world. They are prayers worth praying because he did.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

Glory. That's what Jesus' prayer is about here in the Gospel of John. Glory. "Glorify your Son," Jesus prays. It's chapter seventeen, almost the end of the Gospel. We are coming to the climax, to the end toward which the whole event was aiming from the philosophical beginning and the first miracle with water into wine and the wonder that ensued. Glorify your Son. "Your Son," he prays. Not me. He doesn't say, "glorify me," which is what you'd expect if it was just a prayer between Jesus and his Father. No, it's not just a prayer; it's a sermon, an announcement, a word of encouragement for those who are about to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It's not a prayer like we understand prayers. It's a pastoral prayer, where the pastor prays words that the congregation doesn't have words to pray, but they can nod along as though those are exactly the words they were longing to say. Jesus prays like that, for them and for himself too. But through him, through his life and his suffering and his death, he prays for them. He puts the words in their mouths.

Of course, the prayer could be a construct. Since the Gospel of John was written many years after the event, this prayer could be a prayer made up of the prayers

of the church, of leaders and followers, and hopes and dreams. It could be a prayer that was really a theological treatise on the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. “Glorify your Son” as a way to explain to those who come after the event what it all means. But then again, maybe Jesus prayed this way for those who haven’t yet made it through, so that they had a word to hang on to when the wind begins to howl and rain begins to fall, a word to cling to when the ground trembles and the temple shakes: “Glory.”

Do yourself a favor; listen to the amazing Oscar-winning original song by John Legend and Common from the movie *Selma*:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUZOKvYcx\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUZOKvYcx_o)

It begins *“One day when the glory comes / it will be ours, it will be ours / oh one day when the war is won / we will be sure / Oh glory (Glory, glory).”* It’s not about completion, but about hope. It is not the victory chant, though victory is assured. Glory. It is not that there isn’t suffering to come, but that there is redemption to be found even in the midst of suffering. Glory. It’s not that everything is good and right and whole, but that goodness and justice and wholeness are in sight. Glory.

What a word to have on the tip of our tongues when things seem uncertain. Glory. Not the glory of this world – awards and prizes and offices and achievements; not the glory of celebrity or wealth. No, “glorify your Son” because your Son is glorifying you by finishing the work, by accepting the cross, by taking the nails, by breathing through the pain. He was glorifying God by dying. It’s true: it sounds . . . barbaric. This is the stumbling block that Paul talks so much about. How does this cruel and painful death give God glory? Wouldn’t living be a better way to glorify?

Yes. It is a better way. For us. We are called to live, to hand over our lives to him and live. Live fully, live joyfully, live united. His dying prayer is that we might learn to do this living thing together. Together. That’s how we finish this work that he has given us to do. By living fully, joyfully, and united. In peace. Shalom, the fullness of all that God has in store for us. Our lives give God glory, because Jesus’ death gave God glory. Because he finished, we can finish. Because he was faithful, even unto death, we can be faithful in all of life. And give God glory.

Because he was poorer than he had ever been before, he gave away everything, not holding back even the blood in his veins, the breath in his lungs. Because he became poor, he was rich in glory. "Glorify your Son," he prays before those confused and soon to be terrorized disciples, glorify even in death, so that there is glory in life. "I've glorified you," he prayed, by finishing the work. And a day later, he says from his place of execution, "It is finished."