

5th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.12.20

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ 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. ⁶ For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"⁸ and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (577)

When Tobias was two and a half years old, he stumbled into a doorframe and hit his head. It resulted in a slice about two inches long down from his hairline into his forehead. It bled a lot. Jack was about two months old and it must have been a weekend because, though it was the middle of the day, Jesse was home. We loaded the boys into the car and drove to Fairview Hospital

where we figured the wait in the emergency room would be shorter than at BMC. The boys had been born there so we felt it as familiar.

We were all pretty freaked out, blood still pouring from Tobias' face while we drove south, pulled into the emergency driveway, and rushed inside. We were the only ones there and we were ushered quickly in for care.

While Jess saw to the formalities, I stayed with Tobias, with Jack strapped to my front in what would come to be called the Jack-sack. It was assessed that there was no major harm done, that heads bleed a lot, and the cut was superficial, big enough though to require stitches.

They would have to restrain him for that in order to make neat work of it. When one clinician produced the board they'd use for that, she tried reassuring Tobias. "See, it's a surfboard," she said, a well-meaning attempt. She even mimicked surfing.

But it was not a surfboard. Besides which, Tobes had no notion of surfing or surfboards.

As they proceeded to tie down his arms and legs, and he proceeded nearly to panic, I got right in his face, held his eyes with mine, Jack squeezed in the space between him and me. "You have to stay still," I told him. I was remembering my own time as a child when I'd been strapped down to a board just like this. My cousin's horse had thrown me off. "They're making it so you'll stay still. They have to sew your skin. You're alright." I'll never forget his eyes. "This could hurt," I told him, "but you're alright."

The truth calmed him down, though he was still afraid. And when his experience of what was to happen matched what I'd said would likely happen, I think we both figured out what trust feels like, why it's important.

I actually don't think I'd ever told the truth quite like that before, or ever seen it have so clear an effect.

Jesus was talking here to the disciples in anticipation of something that would hurt—and I'm not talking about crucifixion, which would hurt *him*, I'm talking about his being about to leave them, which would hurt *them*. We're amidst Jesus' Farewell Discourse here, which Jesus delivered to the disciples on the last night of his life, the night we commemorate on Maundy Thursday. Just prior this conversation between Jesus and Philip, Judas is remembered to have gone out to do quickly what he was going to do. The other disciples had little notion of what that was, but Jesus seems to have known full well.

And now he would speak. He would tell them the truth, not that they would fully grasp it.

It doesn't seem right that we're plunged back into Holy Week, does it? Like the snow we all woke up to yesterday, and the cold wind that day would have us endure, it doesn't seem right that we should be right back where we started, not when we'd made such progress into Eastertide. The resurrection set us on new footing; the resurrection narratives gave us new hope. But here we are, right back in the midst of things—a great unraveling.

Worse, those of us who are familiar with this passage are probably so because we've heard it at funerals. It's a popular one for funerals. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus is remembered to have said just prior to his own death. "In my father's house, there are many rooms," he reassures us that there will be room for all who hope in such a thing, and maybe even for those who don't. "See, I am going ahead of you to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also." This separation, in other words, will be temporary, temporal. "Believe in God; believe also in me," he said, though it might just as well be translated, "You trust God; you trust me also." So, this separation: it isn't real, in that it's not lasting, our trust of which is a point of proof. See, it's perfect for funerals.

As for Eastertide...? Maybe not so much.

As for *this* Eastertide, when we know something about separation, something about all in our own little rooms...? Maybe, yes?

The First Letter of Peter is a pastoral letter. It seems written for a general audience rather than to a specific one. Unlike the letters that we know Paul to have written, which are each addressed to specific congregations in specific places, each facing quite specific problems which Paul meant to address in his writing, this is a general letter written to Christian congregations concerning the sorts of things church congregations would find relevant. For this reason, it's concluded this letter came later in the game than those Pauline ones.

It might be worth saying, Paul was one of the earliest writers whose work came to comprise the New Testament, and for this, there's little sense in those of anything established—neither established theology nor Christology nor even ecclesiology.

At the time of Paul's writing, there was no theology to take into account a trinitarian God, a God whose expression in the world was threefold—transcendent over all, imminent amidst all and among all and within all, and abiding in time to continue to work the works of God; there

was no sense of Creator transcendent, Christ imminent, and Holy Spirit spanning and interwoven. Paul had to make that up; he was the first that we know of to come to that problem for figuring out.

At that time, too, there was no Christology as the Christ event had just happened a few years earlier. Paul, therefore, had to make this up too, to figure out what this new revelation had to say about the ancient of days.

At that time, there was no ecclesiology, no settled understanding of what the church was, what this network of congregations was to do or how it was to behave or what it was to stand for or to comprise of. Paul was making all this up as he went along, traveling the Mediterranean region and establishing churches in the model of synagogues, a loose network, though not just of learning as you'd find in a synagogue, but also of worship, as in the Temple.

As for the letters that have come to be called the Pastoral Letters, many come eighty years after Paul's letters, there is a feeling of things having become established. If still very much in play, there is here an agreed upon vocabulary and set of practices, images and even hymns.

There's also a sense that the purpose behind the letters is less about some particular struggle—as in the Church of Corinth where, for example, the widely varied population pressed upon this congregation the question as to who's acceptable and who's authoritative, or as in the Church in Rome, where this question was a live one, whether Gentile Christians must adhere to the whole of the Jewish Law as the Jewish Christians did. No, in the Pastoral Letters, the purpose behind the letter was more general—what does participation in a church congregation look like, what are its practices, what is the liturgy, language, sound and song?

In this particular pastoral letter, so-called First Peter, the purpose behind it all was what questions new Christians might have brought to bear. Newly baptized, they were imaged even as infants in Christ, and, like newborn infants, they were exhorted to long for pure, spiritual milk that they might grow into salvation. The letter would go on to speak of baptism, suffering, and particularly the suffering that comes of the loss when an old identity no longer holds, and finally more general exhortation for the new convert.

As for why anyone would have joined up in the first place, this pastoral letter understood the reasons thus: that where once people had little reason to hope, now they might have real reason to hope; where once all seemed perishable and corruptible, now there might be

imperishability and incorruptibility; where once there was ignorance, now there might be knowledge, even wisdom; where once there was but flesh, now there was also spirit; where there had been but no mercy, now there would be mercy practiced and lived out and offered forth so to abound.

This is all to say there was a lot of appeal to be found in this new gathering of people, appeal which had nothing to do with “religion” or doctrine or pie-in-the-sky salvation (though also exclusive salvation, as in “get in, otherwise you’ll be out”) and had everything to do with lived practice, manifest communion, a realization of God’s deathless eternity now brought into historic time. Really, there was a lot of appeal in this new mode of living—and I like to think there still is. It’s a matter of to whom or what we become attached, and how we manage that attachment when it seems to be severed.

It’s the apparent severing of that attachment that Jesus is speaking to here among his disciples. As he readies himself to leave them, yet reassures them that he is ever with them, he is speaking of an apparent severing of attachment, apparent only because he is going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, apparent also because of what he’s invoking in speaking yet again in “I am...” statements.

“I am...” statements: The Gospel of John is full of them, seven or eight of them depending on how you count. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the living water.” “I am the vine and you are the branches.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” as we just heard Jesus say in the passage we read earlier.

It’s easy, of course, to hear these statements as if they are about himself in some modern sense, some sense as the buffered, autonomous, individuated person, and moreover personality that is the man, Jesus. It’s easy then to understand following Jesus as if it were a cult of personality, a belief system built around a person, though this time the right person! And, really, much of Christianity in America at least does indeed seem to have been reduced to that. There is in American Christianity something very reduced about what it means to follow Christ—reduced though hardly ever fully described. There’s something very reductive about what it means, very prescriptive about what’s required here, though also seldom clearly drawn or imaged—for to draw or image it would involve the imagination, and once the imagination is involved, any act of

reducing is made impossible. The imagination works in playful defiance of any project of reduction or purification or getting to the fundamentals.

Consider: to say “I am” as Jesus said, “I am,” is to recall God’s introducing Godself to history according to scripture. When calling Moses from a bush that, though burning, was not consumed, calling him to go to the people who were suffering oppression and enslavement that they might be freed, and when Moses asked, “Whom shall I say sent me? What is your name?” the voice answered, puzzlingly, “YHWH,” which sounds like breath or wind and which is understood and rendered as “I Am Who I Am,” or “I Am Being.” It gets translated into the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, as *Ego eimi*, a phrase Jesus is then remembered to have said, “I am...” He says this with particular frequency according to the Gospel of John, seven or eight times, depending on how you count, a phrase quite a bit more suggestive than a simple pronouncement of personal primacy.

When Jesus says, “I am...” he isn’t speaking of himself only, he is identifying with God who is being.

When Jesus says, “I am...” he isn’t asserting his own personhood and personality, he’s joining with the very burning (though not annihilating) essence of being.

And when he urges upon his followers, those first ones and us latter day ones, this *ego eimi*, he’s not urging upon us a confession built around his personage, and especially not some particular assertion of his personage. He is rather urging upon us a joining up with that essence of being. He’s urging upon us God, that breath of life—that, as he is in God, who is being, and as God, who is being, is in him, so we might also be such an abode of being and so we might also find ourselves abiding in being. Deathless life. Limitless joy.

It’s as if to follow Jesus is about entering into that utter being.

It’s as if to journey with Jesus, that is to go in the way that he led to the place where he has gone ahead so to prepare a place therein for us, is all to join in with that presence and flow of being.

Coming to the Father, who is being, which can only be done by the exclusive way of Jesus, isn’t about Jesus being the right guy to follow, him picked from amidst a whole roster of possible choices, but is about, as he did, so also us entering into that depth of being, participating in that substance of being, consuming and being consumed by that weight of being. It is not so brittle a

thing as choosing right among a whole roster of co-equal though wrong choices. It is much more glorious than that for it being substantive and utterly consuming a way, almost as difficult to resist as is the gravitational pull of the Earth.

Its appeal is utter.

Its attractiveness is nearly impossible to turn away from or to withdraw from.

It is the beloved object of the loving gaze we each once had for our mothers, those whose earliest nurturance of us truly was as mother's milk while we received in silent, infantile awe. And, though we know now that even the best of those mothers wouldn't quite live up to the awe they first inspired, that experience that we've most of us felt, if from a time prior to our remembering, will be fulfilled. This is the promise of God through Christ to us. This is the appeal that first letter of Peter issued forth.

We don't feel it now, or it's quite likely we don't. It's quite likely we seldom ever feel it absolutely, and probably feel it even less so now. Now, I imagine we know separation more than attachment or fulfillment. Now we know severing of ties, or at least suspension of them. This weird process of sheltering in place among global pandemic is both something we're all going through together, but also something we're going through all alone, a communal experience of near total isolation, a time of being cut off that might though open a way to a surprising presence of being.

Because none of this forecloses on being in the presence of utter presence of being. It actually might open a surprising way for utter presence of being. With none of the usual distractions, with no chance that we might make the mistake of imagining ourselves self-reliant or self-made, we might be more poised than ever in our lives to enter into simple, profound being. We might be more aware than ever that we trust in God and trust also in Christ, and so as we shelter in place we might also find shelter in God, abiding in him and allowing his abiding in us.

Or maybe not. This might be one more thing we can't manage to do amidst this new, strange, anxious-making reality. Really, the pain Jesus foretold to his followers of his coming leaving and of how fundamentally this would change much about their lives and life, might be in real ways our pain. The truth he spoke to them might be what truth he speaks to us. But this, if nothing else, might palliate a bit, calm us like nothing less than truth can—and certainly we've suffered a lot of what's less than true.

It hasn't helped.

And so we wait—a return to fuller life. Perhaps now though we wait more alert to that for which we wait, which is itself the beginning of fulfillment.

Thanks be to God.