

May 10, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Easter
Scripture Readings and Sermon

PSALM READING: Psalm 146:1–10

Put Not Your Trust in Princes

146 Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

2 I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

3 Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

4 When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish.

5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,

6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever;

7 who executes justice for the oppressed,
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

9 The Lord watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

10 The Lord will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.

Praise the Lord!

FIRST READING: Acts 6:1–9

Seven Chosen to Serve

6 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. **2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up

preaching the word of God to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” **5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Stephen Is Seized

8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

EPISTLE READING: 1 Peter 2:2–10

2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— **3** if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. **4** As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, **5** you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. **6** For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” **7** So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” **8** and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” 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, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies 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.

GOSPEL: John 14:1–14

I Am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life

14 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. **2** In my Father’s house are many rooms. 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, that where I am you may be also. **4** And you know the way to 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, the

truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7** If you had known me, you would have known 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 it is enough for us.” **9** Jesus said to him, “have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? 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 authority, 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, or else believe on account of the works themselves. **12** “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. **13** Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14** If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Sermon 19 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Stoneborn”

1 Peter 2:2-10

Dear friends,

Our epistle lesson continues to feature the writings of St. Peter, and he is using Old Testament quotes to make a relatively simple point. We'll look a little at the quotes, but I'm much more interested in the ways St. Peter says what he says and what that means for us. Sometimes you can learn a lot by *how* precisely the Bible chooses to tell you things, rather than what it is telling you outright. The questions here are many. What does it mean to be a living stone? Why that picture? What do we Christians do with this?

It's worth noting that Peter is talking about behavior in the verse just before the text begins, and he keeps talking about behavior in the verses after this. A lot of it is very standard and useful stuff. Abstain from the passions of the flesh, Peter says after this. You are exiles on the earth. Keep your conduct honorable so that people will see your good works and praise God. All straightforward and good to talk about, but the text isn't about that. The stuff around it is, but that doesn't mean we need to take this as a lecture on proper behavior, because it isn't. It is an explanation and a picture of who we Christians are.

“2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Peter urges us to crave spiritual milk, and I guess we could have an argument about what that means, but I don't want to spend time on that, so I'm just going to tell you instead. Like an infant requires his mother's milk in the first year, and in most instances that is just about all infants can tolerate. Formula is there now but for years it wasn't. Goat's milk, cow's milk, baby stomachs can't handle that stuff, they need mommy. So, we Christians are asked to long for spiritual milk, the nourishment of our spirits. Like breastmilk, it is very specific. Again, babies can't have much in the way of anything else for a long time. Our spiritual health is the same way, you and I. We survive on a diet of God's promises. We are nourished by hearing what God has to say to us, by hearing that we are sinners and that He has sent His son to save us. These are facts that are easy to memorize, but we're not talking about knowledge or the brain here, we're talking about the soul. The food of the soul is God's Word and nothing else, and we should crave it, which you do, or you would not be listening to me.

Peter then goes on to describe the effects of this milk. It changes us into living stones, a curious analogy to my ears but one that Peter is using because Christ Himself is described this way. That's why he quotes the Old Testament, to tell us where he is getting this somewhat bizarre picture. Describing someone as a stone nowadays has some mixed messages. It could be flattering, someone who is like a rock is hard, stubborn, secure enough in his convictions or physical health that not much can touch him or move him. It could also be quite insulting. Describing someone as a stone could mean they are dumb, could mean that they aren't keen on showing any feelings. So what is Peter talking about?

Think about stones. They are hard, good building material, but you have to get them to the right

shape, which takes tools and a fair amount of work. You also have to bind them together with something, typically mortar. If you can cut stone and glue it together with other stone, suddenly you have a nice, tough building that isn't going to burn easily or fall over in a breeze. Peter is describing us as this to remind us of our value as the people of God, the church of God. He takes the trouble to remind us that, like Christ, we were rejected by men but chosen and precious to God. He reminds us that we need to be put with other stones to serve our best purpose. If Christianity is like a building, Peter reminds us that we need the other stones. We need to be put together with them into the right place by the builder to fit where we are supposed to fit. They need to stay together not just to be strong, but to serve their purpose. Peter says we are the same.

Jesus was God's first stone, the cornerstone, the one that has to be stronger than any other. But as God's people, you and I are added to what Jesus builds. That is quite flattering to us at first, but it says much more about God. If you and I are stones, we are those stones that you pick out of the fields before you plant, these rough, cracked, misshapen lumps not good for much. Our sin makes us so. We stick out at odd angles. We go our own road. We think we know best and we think that God's meddling can be frustrating. But Peter reminds us that God's work on us is like a mason with his stones. He cuts, shapes, grinds them down, maybe throws some cement into the cracks. Then the mason puts the stones on top of other stones, next to other stones, and suddenly you've got something useful.

Peter reminds us what our purpose is. Like a temple, we stones are to be sacrifices to God, living sacrifices. Not animals whose throat is slit and are good only for the life they spend, we're something different. We're God's glory, His artwork, His masterpiece, His pride and joy. Remember that sinners are nothing more than rough stone. We need a lot of hammering and filing to be useful, but God doesn't treat us like a bother. Saving us, and making us holy, is not a chore to God that He has to get out of the way so we can glorify Him. So many churches make it seem like God secretly resents the work He has to

do to save us. Peter is telling us, no, God glories in this work. He's proud of it. If God is an artist, He is an artist who makes righteousness happen in things they are not, and again, we are his masterpiece. Our salvation is the thing that God desires from us, our righteousness, our redemption, together, as church. God is not the mob, who does us a favor and now we owe Him. No, God saves and shows off His achievement with the pride of the artist. That achievement is us, God's children.

He does talk somewhat about a purpose beyond that, a function as it were, but this too is a joy. **“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” 7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”**

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, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Many things to discuss here. Our function is twofold, and it mirrors some of what Jesus was here to do. First, God saves us and makes us church to be a stumbling block. We are supposed to put that Word of God out, that spiritual milk that we crave, we share it, and it doesn't always resonate with people to put it mildly. Sometimes it gets in the way, sometimes they break their heads on it, sometimes it just makes them trip. A stumble can change your life, or it can be just a temporary interrupt to your trip depending on the circumstances. God's Word can do either, it depends on God and it depends on the person, and our function as the stones of the church is to be a vessel for that Word, spilling it all over the place at the same time.

That's our second function. The church is to contain God's Word, to have it, but not to restrain it. We're like a cup with holes that's meant to be that way. We proclaim the excellencies, which is a really

awkward, borderline silly phrase in English, but all Peter is telling us to do is to tell the story. Here's what sin is. Here's who we are. Here's what God has done. It doesn't have to be fancy, but it does have to be true, and that is a tough thing these days. We share what we know. We share what we've received. We share what we are. God gives us kindness, we give it out. God tells us about ourselves, about Himself, and we tell it abroad.

We did that. We do that. We do a lot of the stumbling bit, ticking people off with the truth, turning them off with our attitudes. Now we can barely do that because we can barely even speak to each other, let alone anyone else. True as all that is, and annoying and even grim as all that seems to be, we still have our first purpose. We as a church are here to be built into a church by God. He brings the stones in, in the end. He must. We cannot. God finds His children. He finds them in sickness and health, prosperity and poverty. He will find His children here and feed them.

Thanks be to God that we are among them.

Amen.