

Texts: 1 Peter 2:1-9, 19-25; Matthew 16, 24-26

Subject: The Living Stone and a Chosen People

Theme: The Builder at Work

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 17, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.” I wanted us to hear that last verse from last week’s reading as we continue our series on First Peter and “The Hope That is In You.” Who has been born anew? You! All who hear this word, all who have been blessed by the good news of Jesus Christ, have been born anew. That’s amazing stuff. It’s countercultural - we are not what we were - not what we seem to be - we are not the same - but changed, transformed through God’s love and the Holy Spirit given to us. Born anew. Maybe it reminds us of Nicodemus who asked Jesus about being reborn, and the new life we have in Christ Jesus. Maybe there was a time when you didn’t know about Jesus, and what freedom in Christ means, and who you have been created and called to be. We have been changed - we are brand new - given “a new birth into a living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3).

I don’t always feel brand-new though. I must be a work in progress. And hope - hope can run low. True, our *expectation* of what Christ will do is helpful, but what about what I’m facing in the meantime, what about what I’m feeling and going through right now?

It’s hot out there this week, and I guess we should expect that. It seems to catch most of us off guard every year. It’s July in Las Vegas, folks, we know it’s going to be hot. But it’s been sticky and humid hot the last few days, which was a shock for our

family, just returning from a trip to the beaches of San Diego. (Just 82 degrees there today I think.) In the summer heat, especially when I find myself driving around town, visiting and meeting neighbors or dropping kids off somewhere, even just driving home from church - by the time I get in the house, I'm covered with sweat. You want to get in and change clothes as soon as possible. The sweaty shirt and jeans come off, and the comfy house clothes go on. It's a powerful moment, when the weight of the world - symbolized here by the clothes on the floor - gets shed for the peace of being home. It's certainly a privilege not all enjoy these days. Some might just be facing air-conditioner problems while others do not experience that peace of a safe place to live. It is a task, just to endure, and persevere, just to live some days. I am reminded daily to pray for those who work outdoors and all who are just trying to survive.

I'm grateful to Pastor Matt who finished the message last week by sharing how this letter of 1 Peter invites us to "play the game as if you've already won." In Christ, we have already been welcomed into God's victory for the world in Jesus. It is encouragement. This letter was written to encourage a community that was suffering, persecuted, on the margins of the society at the time, in the region we would know as the modern nation of Turkey. This was likely a message that would be hard to hear for some but life giving to those who were fighting for their lives every day. We'll hear more next week about how this at-risk community was to engage their faith even in the midst of suffering.

We are reminded that we have been born anew - and this second chapter begins with the call to "rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, guilt, insincerity, envy, and all slander." The greek word here is *aposthesthai* - stripping off, as in one's clothing. We

are encouraged to be something other than what the world has made us, to shed that skin, and be formed by God's word - just as an infant is nourished by their mother's milk. So we *strip off* that stuff that doesn't help us grow, that the world teaches us, that we think we need to get by sometimes. We leave that behind and for real life, we turn to what really gives us all that is vital, God's word, unadulterated, undefiled, and pure. We return to the foundation.

When we take the time to focus on the word, in Bible study, personal devotions, spiritual practices and disciplines, gathering with the faithful on a regular basis, we find our focus shifting, away from ourselves, and onto the love and promises of God, onto the ways we can be of service, and in mission and ministry for the sake of our neighbors. We will be encouraged, relived of our burdens, and comforted by God when we intentionally and consistency return to the Word.

We need to, because as most of us have experienced, the world is a difficult place to be. Just about every day I get to speak with the guys who show up for our meal program here - they get here around noon - the meal is served at 2pm. They're on a bus schedule and have to get here when the buses run. Thanks to you who bring donations, we are able to hand out cold water so they can stay hydrated in the summer. They get to know Mary and Alfie and I, and they share their stories - often through tears, of loss, and physical injuries, and broken relationships, and former lives and careers that seemed to have disappeared with the passing years. We saw signs of similar struggles in downtown San Diego - tents pitched just outside the city housing commission, and a growing population of people living unsheltered on the streets.¹ The same is happening

¹ "Homeless Count Up 10% in San Diego County:" <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/homelessness/story/2022-05-19/despite-more-shelters-outreach-programs-homelessness-on-rise-in-san-diego>, accessed 7/15/22.

in our city. Others are suffering from underemployment, loneliness and grief, physical and mental illness and more.

None of us were ever promised a life free from suffering. But for so many it seems harder than ever just to live.

Followers of Christ are named here as “living stones.” Sounds like an oxymoron - like “jumbo shrimp,” “organized chaos,” “a deafening silence.” Psalm 118 proclaims the messiah as “the stone the builders rejected.” And for us, that stone is Jesus Christ, the living word who is the rock and foundation of our faith. He is the builder at work in us. The descendants of some of the first ones to follow Christ, Palestinian Christians in Israel are known by the name “living stones,”² having been cut from the same rock of faith. They are ones who know about perseverance, about suffering, and enduring many hardships in their day to day life. You’ll meet them if you ever get to visit the Holy Land, as they are often the shop keepers and artisans selling items to the pilgrims who take that journey.

Every week as we gather in this place to worship God on this corner I’m reminded of the ones who built it so many years ago, in 1956, and give thanks for those who laid a foundation here. You can see the cornerstone dedication just outside the doors of the sanctuary that reminds us of all that has been entrusted to us. The builder is still at work, and we continue in mission and ministry together here *sharing the heart of Christ in the heart of the city*, even with a new name and new faces, and new opportunities to reach even beyond our geographical borders, to encourage others, to life high the cross, and create space for others to be built up into the body of Christ

² “Why are Holy Land Christians Called “Living Stones?”
<https://holylandpilgrimages.org/why-are-holy-land-christians-called-living-stones/>, access 7/15/22.

here. It is a blessing and gift, and despite the challenges, we persist, because of the call that God has placed on each of our hearts. To worship and learn, and bless other, to grow as disciples, and people who work for justice and peace in the world.

We too are called to be living stones, being built up in love to know Christ more every day. Maybe we were sheep going astray, but we hear the shepherds voice and we return. We are reminded of who we really are, now that we are in Christ - a royal priesthood, a holy nation, for a purpose - to tell our stories as part of *the* story and to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light,” that all the world may know the love of God in our savior, Jesus.

Amen.