

Pentecost 12, Proper 16
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Rock

My High School in Ecuador was a tight-knit community that celebrated our relationships in many ways. There was a tradition that the Senior class would give awards to its members for various things, serious and silly. They were guesses about the future, where students were voted "most likely to..." These were read out at Commencement. I had been involved in church-types of things throughout my High School years there, but there were plenty of others whose roles in such activities were higher profile, so, it came as something of a surprise to me that I was voted most likely to go into full-time Christian service.

When I look back, while it was not exclusive, it was certainly accurate. Since a moment in my Senior year when I "heard the call," I never really have wavered. Oh, I've thought about what it would have been like to go into ornithology, my other love, but I would have made a bad scientist. No, I am exactly where I need to be. So, when things get tough, (and they have,) I look back to these things, and they re-ground me. They remind me that I AM on the right path, and that God is behind and in my call.

The Scriptures often call us to such a re-grounding. In the lesson from Sacred History, the word of the Lord by the prophet bids people to "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and the quarry from which you were dug..." The author goes all the way back to Abraham. Just like God's promise to Abraham is eternal, and is being fulfilled, So, what God is doing now is dependable.

It is a word of encouragement to a people called out of exile back to the Promised Land. Times were changing, and people weren't sure how to respond. The prophet calls them to remember what the story tells them about who they are, and who God is. Remember the rock from which you were hewn.

In the lesson from the Apostolic Tradition, Paul calls upon the Christians in Rome to be something the rest of the world is not. All around them, people jockeyed for position. The higher on the ranking in Roman society, the better the bennies; the lower, the worse. And at the top was the Emperor, who required symbolic sacrifices of incense at temples to him. To not offer that kind of sacrifice was to set oneself outside the inner circles, and to risk the arena and death. It was a dangerous time to be a Christian.

In the midst of this, Paul calls on them to offer, not incense, but their own selves, as a living sacrifice to God. It involves a different way of living, one where jockeying for position is not what things are all about, but a community that makes up a whole, where each person has gifts to give and needs to be met by others, knit together in a body that is the body of Christ. He was saying, "How do you live as a Christian in Rome? Look to Christ, and you will know how to live. He is the Rock from which you were hewn. The

humanity we see in him is the humanity you are born for; a humanity rooted in divine self-giving love.”

In the Gospel lesson for today, you can just see Jesus and the disciples walking along. Caesarea Philippi is north and west, toward the coast, not far from his base of operations in Nazareth, and he asks the million-dollar question. It sounds like a campaign question: Who do folks think I am? Like, "Who do folks think Kamala Harris is?" You can even apply it to yourself: Who do folks say YOU are? The question can be answered in a hundred ways, all of which are true and none of which sum it all up.

But then: “Who do YOU say that I am?” Good ol' Peter jumps in, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" Yes, Peter, you are right. In another Gospel Peter and Jesus get in an argument about what this means, but in this version, it's an unqualified, "Yes." But there are consequences to that response. On this response Christ will build the Church. It's not really about Peter. It's about the church that will be built on Peter's response. It's about living as a community gathered around this one, Jesus. Jesus is the Rock from which the church is hewn.

And the gates of death (Hades is land of the dead,) will not prevail, because the Church is about LIFE. What kind of life? It's like the blackberry brambles that grow behind my fence. No matter what death I deal to the sprouts that come up in my garden, they come back. Except this life is helpful—it doesn't try to choke out my strawberries. This is a life that death cannot finally hold; a life that transcends all our dying and converts it into renewed, enlarged and transformed life. This is the Rock from which the Church is hewn.

It's a life that can effect changes on earth that affect heaven, because in this community earth and heaven are brought together in the presence of Christ in the church. Now, every time we release good into the world, heaven is known on earth, and every time we bind evil on earth, space is made for heaven's goodness to emerge. Every time we release our ego's knee-jerk response to offence, we offer heaven's grace to the moment, and every time we bind ourselves to one another in Christ's self-giving love, we bind that divine love to creation. This is the Rock from which the church is hewn.

And no, the disciples don't really get it. They won't get it until the Resurrection, They may as well not bother trying to tell anyone because then people will have to unlearn what they disciples taught them so they can meet the post-resurrection Messiah! But they will come to see how at that moment they were being hewn from that same Rock.

Now put this in the context of the church for which this is written. Matthew's church was mainly Jewish, under heavy persecution from mainline Jews who saw the followers of Jesus as heretical. Things would change, but not for a while yet. In the meantime, as they face the adversity perpetrated by their own kindred Jews, they need anchoring. They, too, are asking, "Now just who is this Jesus? Tell us again why this is important." This story is told to reground them in the Rock from which they were hewn, Jesus' own messiahship. They are the working out of this very promise—the church the gates of

death cannot overcome. And just as the disciples didn't "get it" until after the resurrection, so all the Jews who are coming after them don't "get it," because they have not yet met the resurrected Jesus.

So, what does that mean for us today?

I don't know how the history books are going to write the story of 2020, but I am convinced we are in the midst of a cataclysmic change in world social order. The change has been coming for some time now, building as all major change does, with incremental steps, small at first, and gaining speed and strength, each one anticipating what is not yet fully known, or perhaps too scary to admit. We look back and we say, "Yes, we could have seen this coming. It's bound to be as it is." Sometimes a cataclysmic event propels us forward at warp speed. It has been widespread illness before, but never on a global scale as now. This is the age when the world groaned with illness.

Some things are common to all such times. Anxiety levels soar and people resort to their most trusted strategies. These are often infantile and invariably selfish, for example, the picture in the media of the young woman holding a sign with a mask and a line through it that reads, "My body, my choice." No, it's my body, her choice, and she doesn't have the right to infect me! But she doesn't get it—wrapped up in her own fear and anxiety over being told what to do when the world feels like it's coming apart. Another sign reads, "I'll keep my guns and my money and you keep the 'change.'" Entrenched entitlement is a panther in a corner. The ones who seek power during these times are often those least equipped to handle it, and those who are most equipped are the last chosen.

But at the same time, the structures that held things together begin to crack. Opportunities like never before emerge. Social injustices on which we just couldn't get traction find new opportunity: Black Lives Matter, renewed interest in protections for undocumented immigrants, and a chance at rethinking and reimagining how basic social systems work and do their work, like policing and politics.

When the whole world is coming apart at the seams, we need to look to the Rock from which we were hewn, that great declaration, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Is not just the central declaration of the Christian, it is a description of our own calling in these times. The human that we know as divine shows us what humanity can be. The Jesus we follow is the Jesus we are to be like—even more, in whose spirit we share. This is our grounding in troubling times.

When the world is being crucified, our Rock is Jesus' self-giving love. If we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are caught up in that process, then God's great act of healing and restoration was manifest in Jesus' self-giving. Jesus gave his life for us; we give our lives for the world. We walk in his footsteps, for we are hewn from that same Rock.

If we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are caught up in that process, then God's great act of healing and restoration is a movement toward Jesus'

vision of compassionate justice. Jesus healed the sick, cured the lame, gave sight to the blind, fed the hungry, challenged those in power with the truth. If this is Jesus' vision for the world, then it is ours, for we are hewn from that same Rock.

If we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are caught up in that process, then God is somehow moving through all this turmoil with us. If God is with us, then all of creation is pressing toward a great divine dream of what life could be. If death leads to resurrection in Jesus, then the death of the old world order can be a portal to resurrection; a new vision of what it means to be the church in the midst of a newly minted society. Will it be utopia? Absolutely not, but it will be another step in search of God's great dream. There is hope, because God's hand is behind all this. If this was the hope that carried Jesus through Good Friday to Easter Sunday, then it is our hope, too, for we are hewn from that same Rock.

What the world needs from the Church more than anything else, is Rock.

Meditation questions:

How is the current world crisis affecting you most?

How does your faith ground you in the midst of the chaos?

How do you need help in that grounding?

How can you share the hope that grounding gives you?