

## THE FINEST OF MATERIALS

### I Peter 2:2-10

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on May 10, 2020, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.*

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#### ***I Peter 2:2-10***

*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

*Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. 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." 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," 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. 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. 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.*

Prayer:

*May God grant me to speak with judgment  
And to be thoughtful in what I have received;  
For God's Spirit is the guide even of wisdom  
And the corrector of the wise.  
For both we and our words are in God's hand...<sup>1</sup>*

This is our ninth Sunday in a row to worship with leaders in the Sanctuary and congregants spread out in homes all over the region and indeed nation. As we have gotten relatively settled in how to livestream these services and how to keep our classes and groups going through connections online, within the staff and among the leaders of the church we have begun to think about the question not so much *when* we will be able to return to our facilities, but *what shape* our worship and ministries will take, at least until a vaccine or treatment is available.

Based on guidelines circulating among religious communities, a series of questions are in order, as we peer, even via computer screen, into the future:

*Concerning worship:*

- Will it be prudent to allow more than about a hundred people in our Sanctuary at one time, and those, spread out in alternative pews, seated closely only with people with whom they live and at least six feet away from all others?

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Wisdom of Solomon, 7:15.

- Will we be allowed to greet one another in any physical way, going in, coming out, passing in the hallways?
- Will we be able to pass and therefore touch any physical object during the service: bulletin, hymnbook, fellowship pad, prayer card, collection plate, communion tray?
- Will we be able to partake of any bread or wine for communion in any way other than that which pre-wrapped and sitting on a table, waiting for us to pick up and partake of those elements of the earth which become the body and blood of Christ for our faith?
- Will a choir larger than 3-4 people, a good twelve feet apart, be able to gather?
- Will we be allowed to sing a hymn, doxology, Gloria Patri, Kyrie?
- Will there be a time for children to come forward and gather on the steps? Or will they have to remain safely in the pews with their parents and siblings?
- Will we be wearing masks, perhaps fashioned after Biblical characters, in a nod both to learning and the length of time it may seem that we have been wearing them?
- Will we ever again experience these pews filled and this choir loft bursting at the seams: Festival Sunday, Easter, Remembrance Sunday, a large and bittersweet funeral?

*Concerning activities growing out of worship:*

- Will we ever again receive a cup of coffee in this building – church-like as its taste may be – bite into a cookie in Fellowship Hall, eat a fresh-made sandwich in Johnson Parlor following a funeral, sit at a pancake breakfast or pie auction in a roomful of youth and parents, make sandwiches for bag lunch in our kitchen, crowd in for Blue and Gold banquets and church picnics and cookouts?
- Will those of us who worship at 8:30 ever again worship in the chapel? Will we partake of Doug Anderson’s banana bread afterward, unless he drops it onto our doorstep, stork-like, and disappears into the sunshine without a masked “hello” or a “gloved” handshake?
- Will we have childcare? Nursery care? Adults gathered into a room to learn side by side in chairs or across one another at tables?
- Will we have youth fellowships, mission trips, travels across the nation and world, retreats for differing ages and groups in centers and camps nearby?
- Will we be able to volunteer for in-person contact in local mission, national mission, international mission, or will the only resource it will be safe to give is funding, prayer, advice?

These are the questions that churches and synagogues and mosques are asking. They speak nothing of questions every school, university, childcare center, non-profit, factory, law firm, medical practice, legislative body faces as well.

Fortunately, the answer to many of these questions is probably “yes,” at least “yes, in time,” “yes, someday.” But the “yes” will likely not be fully the case until a vaccine is developed, manufactured, affordable, available,

and partaken by a large part of the population. And as much as we count on science, the development of a vaccine is not a guarantee. Remember: we have never developed a vaccine for AIDs, though treatment and prevention have rendered us less fearful of that disease and more welcoming with whom we interact.

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Now I realize that up to this point in the sermon, I have probably sufficiently depressed everyone. But there is hope. There is good news. Hope that is deeper and broader than the state of pandemic at any one time, than the length it lasts, the pain it inflicts.

I want now to turn our attention to that hope.

## I.

First, the church of Jesus Christ has been here before, even in the Western world, even in the modern era.

A year into his imprisonment for resistance to Nazism, a year away from his execution for plotting against that radical evil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to think seriously on the form the church would take once the evil for which he had been prisoned was defeated.

In a condition he labelled “a world come of age” – a world in which people and nations live and make crucial decisions “as if there is no God,” Bonhoeffer asked:

- What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religion-less world?
- How do we speak of God – without religion?
- How do we speak in a secular way about God?
- What is the place of worship and prayer in a religion-less situation – in a “world come of age”?<sup>2</sup>

## II.

Into this plethora of question marks 75 years after Bonhoeffer penned them, a ringing call comes to the church in our day – and to individual Christians within it – from the little-known First Letter of Peter.

The passage we read today closes with a *summons*:

*9 ...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 marvellous light.*

*<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people [the letter continues],  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.*

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition* (Edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1953), 280-281.

These words complete the clarion call with which the passage opens:

*4 Come to [Christ]...let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...*

And its gentle phrase:

*<sup>2</sup>Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation...*

The Christians in First Peter who heard this call were not living in easy times. They were living a quarter a century after the death and resurrection of Christ. They were living in Rome. They were a minority, subject to persecution, some episodic, some systematic. They suffered for their faith, and knew they might be called upon at any time to give an account of why they believed the way they believed.<sup>3</sup> And they were re-shaping their faith in light of the fact that Christ had not returned as many had expected soon after his death and resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

Yet still they are being summoned:

*Come...  
Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...  
Grow into salvation.*

In times of ease and times of crisis, in times of plague and pandemic, in times of war and rumor of war, the call of Christ to the church and to us its members is *always* great and *always* compelling, *never* shy, *never* restrained, *never* silent.

### III.

In issuing its call, this passage also promises *materials* with which to exercise the call that are of the highest *caliber* and *quality*.

There is the pure, *spiritual milk* of the word of Christ, the mother's milk of scripture:

- Always natural
- Always human
- Always available
- Always filled with vitamins and minerals
- Always life giving
- Always life sustaining even in its most difficult and deadly forms.

There is the cornerstone of Christ:

*A living stone – neither petrified nor relic  
Though rejected by mortals...chosen and precious in God's sight  
A stone in whose belief no one will be put to shame.*

The materials with which we have been supplied to be built into a spiritual house are of the highest quality.

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<sup>3</sup> See I Peter 2:19-24; 3:14-15; 4:1-4, 12-19; 5:10.

<sup>4</sup> See II Peter 3:1-13.

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In 1957, the newly-elected Senator from Idaho, Frank Church, gave a speech on the floor of the Senate – much earlier in his career than would be the norm – supporting a controversial amendment he offered to a civil rights bill – still debated by historians today – that had the effect of both weakening the provisions in the bill but also allowing the bill to pass. It was the first civil rights legislation to pass the Senate in in eighty years since Reconstruction had ended and thus become a tiny step in the long march to ending at least legal segregation. In his speech, the Senator – whose nickname was “Senator Sunday School” – said:

...in no field of legislative endeavor must we build more carefully or more thoughtfully than [in civil rights]. This field bears the same relationship to other legislative fields as the building of a *cathedral* bears to the building of a *factory*. In the field of civil rights, we give voice to the finest impulses of our humanity. Our workaday structures, as our workaday laws, may be built with *ordinary* materials. But we must build our places of worship and our laws of liberty with *the finest of materials* and *the greatest of care*. These we build for the ages.<sup>5</sup>

In issuing us the call through the First Letter of Peter to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ *in and beyond* this coronavirus crisis, God has given us *the finest of materials*: the *cornerstone* of Christ, the spiritual *milk* of scripture.

#### IV.

Finally, how can respond to this call in any way other than with humility?

Why are we a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people? What gives *us* the right to go by such *vaulted* names? Nothing. Nothing of *our own doing or making*. Nothing but simply the gracious *action* of God, who reminds us even as he calls us that

*Once we were not a people  
But now we are God’s people  
Once we had not received mercy  
But now we have received mercy.*

It is this same *gracious* action that gives us but one task: to *proclaim* the mighty acts of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, to *proclaim* the mighty acts of the one who feeds us with the mother’s milk of scripture. It is a humbling honor to be named “the church,” to be called to “proclaim the Gospel” in such a time as this.

And it is humbling to have at our disposal the finest of materials – the *precious* stone of Jesus Christ, the *mother’s milk* of scripture – out of which we are privileged to construct the cathedral of the future.

It is humbling to do that with all of you at Westminster.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

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<sup>5</sup>*Congressional Record* 85/1, pp. 13353-54, quoted in Robert A Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 985.