

They were nobody we would want to be – nobody, probably, that we have ever known or would even want to know. They were a ragtag bunch of wandering herdsmen, moving from place to place in search of the perfect pasturing grounds that the oldest among them believed were waiting for them, welcomed by no one, often driven out by the hostility of their neighbors. They were a group of escaped slaves wandering in the desert, pursued by an army from behind them, confronted by walled cities and more armies ahead of them, afraid to turn back, afraid to go on. They were the inhabitants of scattered settlements in the midst of a land new to them, constantly threatened by the more established residents, trying to preserve their odd way of life in the midst of a seductive prevalent culture. They were captives of war, seized in their own homes by an invading army, forced to march across half a continent to resettlement in the heart of enemy territory. They were pathetic survivors, without enough resources to rebuild, struggling to recultivate their land while sworn enemies looked on – they worked with one hand on the plow and one hand on a sword. They were the miserable subsistence farmers in an occupied land, scratching at the arid soil to raise enough to both feed their families and pay the crushing taxes. They were the despised adherents of a strange new religion, whose leader had been tortured and executed as a revolutionary, a danger to public safety.

I am speaking, of course, of the people of God. In their long and troubled history, God's people have been the underdogs far more often than not. From Abraham, the wandering Aramaean, to the Children of Israel in their exodus under Moses, to the splintered tribes at the time of the Judges, to the Exiles in Babylon, to the returnees who struggled to restore the Nation of Israel, first under the Persians, then the Greeks and finally the Romans, to the Early Church, at home with neither the Jews nor the Gentiles, God's people have mostly been those on the outs, the ones on the bottom rung of the ladder, the flotsam and jetsam of history. It is easy for us to forget, I think, in the relative luxury and safety of 21st Century Seattle, that our spiritual forebears were the poor, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the oppressed. Very little of this book was written to those in places of wealth and power and in those few sections, mostly among the books of the Prophets, the message is one of warning and correction. In some ways, we have little in common with the original audience of the Holy Scriptures. In other ways, deeper and less obvious ways, we are exactly alike and the words of our passage this morning are equally as relevant for us as they were for them. They are instructions on just what it means to live life in the realm of the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, on how we can participate in bringing the Kingdom of God near to all, in expanding the Beloved Community and making it a reality for more of our neighbors.

Whether it was the old fisherman himself or a disciple a generation or two later writing in his name, as some scholars believe, the author of I Peter certainly has no illusions about the status of the people of God in the world. You may remember from two weeks ago the opening of the letter: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia..." Peter recognizes that God's people are living a precarious life during his time, a life on the fringes of society. He writes to them so that they will take heart and find hope in the midst of suffering; suffering that we can scarcely imagine. In chapter 2, he reminds them of God's faithfulness by pulling again and again from metaphors used in the Old Testament, beginning with that concept of exile: direct quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah, and references to ideas that were gaining common usage among the early Christians, ideas from letters by his colleague and sometimes rival, Paul, and from the author of Hebrews. These

familiar images and concepts would have been reassuring in and of themselves, connecting those reading Peter's letter with the hard but blessed history of Israel and with their Lord, the Messiah of Israel.

Peter's encouragement to "long for the pure, spiritual milk" would have perhaps called to mind for them similar words in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and in Hebrews, if those circulating works had already reached them, but the image would no doubt have resonated with those well-versed in the promises of the Old Testament which continually point toward a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. Peter holds out spiritual milk as the means toward salvation, "if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good," he says, echoing the Psalmist: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him." The image of spiritually nourishing milk was to remain strong for Christian writers and should especially be embraced by those of us who wish to talk about God as Mother as well as Father. In the early 1400s, the great English mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, "A mother will hold her child to her breast and feed the child with her milk. But our wonderful mother Jesus feeds us with himself, by giving us the food of life."

Peter then turns to the image of Jesus as stone, as cornerstone and as stumbling stone, and of Christians, by extension, as stones themselves. One can imagine that this metaphor would be near and dear to Peter's heart. As I hope you all will remember, the apostle's given name was Simon; he was given the nickname Peter, "the Rock," by Jesus after his declaration of faith at Caesarea Philippi. He uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to compare Christ to a stone, the cornerstone of the faith of those exiles to whom he is writing, a faith not understood by their neighbors. Peter reminds his audience that both Isaiah and the Psalmist have foreseen that Christ would not be accepted by all, that God's Chosen One would be a stumbling block, a "skandalon," to many. It is a reassurance that all that they are experiencing, including Christ's rejection and their own by those around them, has been both seen and prepared for by God.

Peter's word of comfort for these scattered Christians is that, in experiencing persecution, they are sharing in the experience of Jesus. But how does this apply to us? As I said earlier, all of us here this morning are fabulously rich in comparison with these early Christians. At the "Everything Must Change" conference which I attended last week, Brian McLaren pointed out that most of the things we take for granted in America, life expectancies in the 80s, clean, safe food, hygiene, access to dentists and doctors, was beyond the reach of even kings for most of history. None of us are in immanent danger of starvation; indeed, quite the opposite for some of us, although starvation is certainly still a danger in our world and country. None of us are living in danger because of our faith, although our brothers and sisters in Christ are under attack in some places of the world, as witness the recent assassinations of the associate pastor of Gaza Baptist Church or of Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, Iraq. How can we claim solidarity with Christians who lived or who still live under oppression with any integrity?

We certainly cannot do so by turning a blind eye to the many blessings with which God has blessed us. We have been given a good deal and, in the words of our liturgical sisters and brothers, it is right to give God thanks and praise. But just as the Christians to whom Peter wrote were consistently told by their society that they were inferior because of their faith, so too does our society devalue us, though in far subtler ways. It may be more obvious in this part of the

country than in others. Here, after all, we live in the "None Zone" ("n-o-n-e" not "n-u-n"), so called because of the large number of residents who, when asked on surveys for their religious affiliation, respond "None." Here in the "None Zone," an admission that one attends church or any kind of talk about organized religion makes one suspect, less cool, intellectually defective. Of course, we can always take refuge in the old saw that we're not members of any organized religion, we're Baptists. But our society has other ways of devaluing those who do not march to the tune it sets, who do not worship the gods of wealth, power and sex. It's poured over us every day, on television, radio and the internet, in magazines, newspapers and on billboards. Don't own a new Lexus, the latest Blackberry, the tiniest i-Pod, the fastest computer? Then you're just not quite up to the mark, are you? Not going out to dinner every night at Red Lobster, Applebee's, TGIFridays? Don't you deserve a break today? Your life just isn't what it should be. What do you mean you don't smell Zest-fully clean, don't have an Ultrabrite smile, don't wear a lipstick that won't smudge, don't have all-day lashes? Don't you know people will think you are defective? We hear all day long that if we don't dress like this, eat that, use this diet, pump this gas, utilize this broker, fill our houses with stuff we don't really need from this store and if we don't put it all on MasterCard or Visa or American Express, with fees that will drain whatever we have left after we're done spending, then we're just not fitting in, that we are less than what our neighbors think we ought to be. My sisters and brothers make no mistake. We may not be in fear for our lives but we are members of and too-often willing participants in a society bent on devaluing us if we do not do and think and buy exactly as we are told.

Nevertheless, we should not be downhearted. Even in the midst of this subtle psychological warfare, we have nothing to fear. If we had read the Gospel passage from this morning's lectionary, John 14:1-14, we would have heard those words of Jesus, famously borrowed by J.R.R. Tolkien for his character Galadriel, the elf-queen: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." As Peter puts it, "...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." It is a wonderful piling up of affirmation, an escalating series of components of the Good News, designed to lift up our hearts in recognition of God's goodness and our rightful place in God's world. Anthony Robinson, former Pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church downtown, whose column I know some of you read weekly in the P-I, said that this verse reminded him of Jesse Jackson's famous litany, "I Am Somebody." Regardless of what you may think of the Rev. Jackson's politics, he has been a tremendously effective communicator of the Gospel, as befits, I might add, a good Baptist preacher. How many of you remember "I Am Somebody"? You may have seen it on Sesame Street. Let's see if we can capture that feeling of Good News in both I Peter and in Jackson's work this morning. Repeat each line after me:

I Am
Somebody
I Am
Somebody
I May Be Poor
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Young
But I Am
Somebody

Being the Shepherd's Sheep, Pt. 2

I May Be On Welfare
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Uneducated
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Small
But I Am
Somebody
I May Make A Mistake
But I Am
Somebody
My Clothes Are Different
My Face Is Different
My Hair Is Different
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Black
Brown
White
I May Speak A Different Language
But I Must Be Respected
Protected
Never Rejected
I Am
God's Child

Everybody awake now? Good, because I want you to try another litany with me. Dr. Robert Linthicum writes that when he was pastor of Edgewater Church in Chicago, he began every worship service with the litany printed in our bulletin just below the sermon title. We're going to do the same for the next few weeks at least, as we continue our study of I Peter and I want to try it now to get you ready.

“Who are we who gather here?”

“We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that we may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light”

We are a chosen race, but as Dr. Linthicum also writes on this passage, “Being chosen by God is not so much privilege as it is responsibility! You have been saved to serve.” He continues, “The Church is not the church unless it is a Servant Church, a church on behalf of others, a church that both longs and works hard to bring this world “out of darkness into God's marvelous light”. The Church is mission.” So what does that look like? How is it that we are called to serve? Peter says that it is by living our lives in a way that serves as an example to others, in a way that will cause them to recognize that God is doing something special: “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God.” The opening verse of the chapter gives the first specifics on this from Peter: “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.”

Being the Shepherd's Sheep, Pt. 2

Now if we are honest, we must admit that that's a pretty tall order right there. There is not a one of us, I suspect, who doesn't act, speak or think out of malice, guile, insincerity, or envy at least once a week, if not daily. I'm reminded of the old acting adage: "The key is sincerity. Once you can fake that, you can fake anything." But Peter goes on to lay out an even more difficult task for us.

"For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." Peter could have added, "or of tax collectors, the representatives of human authority." Maybe I should have preached this passage last week. Haven't we all been tempted every now and then, to fudge a little bit on our taxes? The government takes so much. But Peter would say, "No. Pay the full amount. Be a good citizen." And he's saying this, remember, to people who not only have a heavy tax burden but whose very lives are threatened by their government because they worship God and not Caesar. To those of us who drive in Lynnwood, Peter might have added, "Be sure to stop at the stoplights." Making what we called when I was a teen a "St. Louis Stop," a look-both-ways-and-roll-through-the-right-turn maneuver at a red light, will get you a ticket thanks to the automated cameras in Lynnwood. We must hold ourselves above reproach, "For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish." I met last week with three Fuller Seminary students to talk about the real world life of a pastor and I reminded them that, as representatives of Christ, they must not only avoid impropriety but also its appearance. There are things that ministers did routinely a generation ago that are now impossible because of the appearance of impropriety. Private counseling behind a closed, solid door is out and so is visiting a private home by yourself. But you don't have to be clergy to have your actions reflect on our faith or our God. I'm reminded of the story of the man who was sitting in his car at a stoplight; the lady in front of him was going through papers on the seat of her car, and when the light changed to green she did not go. She was busy with whatever she was looking at and didn't see the green light. When the light turned to red and she still had still not moved, the driver behind her (with his windows up) started screaming, honking the horn, beating on his steering wheel and saluting her with one finger. He was interrupted by a policeman, tapping on his window.

Still steaming, the man supplied the officer with his license and registration and waited, not very patiently, while the officer returned to his car and got on his radio to check out the information. When at last the policeman returned to the driver's window with the documents, the man was angrier than ever. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "Now I'm later than ever."

The officer replied, "I saw you screaming and beating your steering wheel and flipping that woman off, and I said to myself, 'What a jerk. But there is nothing I can do to him for throwing a fit in his own car.'"

"Then I noticed the cross hanging from your rear view mirror, the brand new 'Choose Life' license tag, the "Love One Another" bumper sticker and the Fish symbol on the back of the car, and I thought you must have stolen the car from a Christian!"

At the last, Peter has a word for the most powerless in his society, the slaves. "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also

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those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." Unfortunately, over the centuries, these verses have been unscrupulously used to justify slavery and worse, but that is far from their intent. Peter is reminding us, whatever our station in life, that we are called to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies and to pray for those who use us badly. This passage is not a license for us to exercise power in whatever way we see fit when we have it but rather it is a call to surrender whatever power we may have in a situation to God, to do as Christ would have done and would have us do. As we look around the world today, we see all too many situations in which those who were formerly oppressed have gained the upper hand and turned to revenge rather than to reconciliation. This was a theme I heard often in the last two weeks, both from Brian McLaren and from Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama; the latter two being members of oppressed or recently-oppressed peoples. In South Africa, reconciliation has been guided by Christian leaders. But we hear and read tales from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Rwanda, and many other places about how Christian clergymen and women, representatives of the Prince of Peace, have joined in or incited the most devastating cruelties. At the height of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland, the most virulent of the Protestant agitators was a Baptist-turned-Presbyterian minister, Rev. Ian Paisley.

Hopefully, we will not need to test our ability to forgive and to reconcile in situations as dire as those but we need to stand ready to extend peace to those who hurt us every day, whether the hurt is a perceived slight from a classmate or co-worker or an unjust action from an employer or a client, or a fender-bender on the street. We are called to act in such a way that we turn our enemies into friends, to extend the love of God into all the world. We are called to remember who we are and whose we are; that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that we are somebody. We must remember this so that we will not be disheartened, so that we will not be frightened. It is the frightened sheep, remember, who go astray. We are loved and ultimately protected by our Good Shepherd; we can afford to be generous, to be loving, to be forgiving. When we remember these things, when we act on these things, then we can live our lives in a way that God can use, as God continues to work through Christ, reconciling all things to Godself. My sisters and brothers, let us pledge, here and now, in our song together, that we will live so that God can use us to bring the world closer to God's Beloved Community. Amen.