

A Chosen People

May 29, 2010 9am & 10:30 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church

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Text: 1 Peter 2:2-10

Lancaster, PA

Introduction

Eugene Peterson in his memoir, “The Pastor”, speaks about his first church during the 1950’s in the new suburbs of Baltimore. As our country was growing and expanding after World War II, churches were popping up in many of the new developments. In Eugene’s area, though, public schools were not allowed to be used for religious purposes, so his church met in his basement for over two years. He nicknamed it the “Catacombs Presbyterian Church.” Can you imagine meeting in a bare, cinder block basement for church week after week? Can you imagine you were a young child and this was your only image of church? What would your definition of “church” be? A cinder block room? Or would it be people? Lots of very different kind of people looking for meaning and purpose in their lives? Eugene formed this definition of church from that experience: “*a colony of heaven in the country of death, a strategy of the Holy Spirit for giving witness to the already-inaugurated kingdom of God.*”

Background

Today we are going to hear the words of Peter to a cluster of these *colonies of heaven in the country of death*. This letter was to suffering believers in First Century Turkey. They were new faith communities. The Romans thought they were a Jewish sect. The Jews were trying to run these Christ-followers out of town and turn the Roman authorities against them. Even in families there was much tension. If the oldest male of the family did not embrace Jesus as the Messiah, then it would be very difficult for anyone else in the clan to follow Jesus. They could be thrown out of their households with no legal rights. If they chose to be baptized, then surely they would face fierce persecution.

What would hold this ragtag group of disciples together? Peter knew that the only one who can save them was Jesus. Jesus was the one who called them to follow him. Jesus was the one who would guide them. Jesus was the one who would by His Holy Spirit work daily in and through their lives to transform them. Jesus is the one who would use them to witness to his love and bless the world. In this letter to those struggling churches, Peter gives them three rich metaphors to understand themselves as a vital part of God’s story.

1 Peter 2:2-10 (*New International Version, ©2011*)

² **Like newborn babies**, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, **like living stones**, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” ⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1. Newborn Babies

Babies like to eat and sleep. It sounds like a great life, doesn’t? Infants need nourishment and rest to grow and develop properly. Take away a baby’s food or drink and you have one miserable baby. They are designed to grow and they will not be happy until they are eating, sleeping, exercising, and growing up. You and I are the same way spiritually. As Peter says, “² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” What would be pure spiritual milk for you and me? What feeds our souls in deep and satisfying ways? God. God is the only one who can satisfy you and me. *We can watch a lot of television. Read the newspaper or surf the web. We can absorb a book week or have fun hobbies, but still be hungry.* We were intricately designed to connect and thrive with God. As you and I open the doors of our souls to God in prayer, we become linked together with God. As you and I reflect on the Bible alone and in community, the Holy Spirit nourishes our minds, wills, and hearts. As we listen to God and respond with joy, we grow up. We mature spiritually. We are shaped into the men and women of God we were designed to be.

How do we feed ourselves? We are people of the Bible. Through daily devotions, journaling, memorizing passages, sermons, podcasts, small groups, classes, and discussion, we allow God to shape our thinking and living. We want to think and live like Jesus. That was important for the first century Christians to understand. It is essential for us. *I would encourage you to meet weekly with one or two other people this summer. Our sermon texts are printed in the Steeple to People. Study and discuss the passage before hear the sermon. Allow the Holy Spirit to feed you all week long. This is how the colony of Heaven thrives in the country of death.*

2. *Living Stones*

The Bible describes Jesus as a living Stone and us at living stones connected to Jesus. ⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. **Eugene Peterson’s 1950’s cinder block house church** was a great object lesson. As his congregation sat in those metal folding chairs looking at those block walls, they could see themselves. They were connected to each other. Each person in the room was needed for this living church to exist. If you looked around the room, there were all very different kinds of people. Older, younger, professionals, working class, male, female from different parts of the country. The only thing they had in common was Jesus. He was the reason they were there. Jesus was their cornerstone. He was the one who would keep them connected and give them direction.

As you look around today, the same is true for First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, PA. Jesus Christ is reason we are meeting today. If Jesus Christ did not live, teach, heal, die, and rise again, we would not be here. If Jesus Christ did not conquer sin and death, we would have no hope. There would be no real forgiveness, no real love, no healing for us or our self-destructive world. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the one we worship. Jesus is our foundation when all else is collapsing around us. The Spirit of Jesus has and will guide and hold this church together in the months and years to come. When the economy bottoms out, when our rivers flood, and even when pastors retire, Jesus still will be the living Stone giving us life, direction, and purpose. Please never forget that. We are the body of Christ, a chosen people, a community of priests. God has equipped this body with all the gifts and leadership right now to lead us into a wonderful future.

3. *Chosen People*

What are we to do? What is the main purpose for us gathering today? Peter declares: ⁹ “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Remember Eugene Peterson’s definition of church: *“a colony of heaven in the country of death, a strategy of the Holy Spirit for giving witness to the already-inaugurated kingdom of God.”*

First Presbyterian Church has been that colony of heaven in the heart of Lancaster for 269 years. Today is no different. We are a worshipping, caring, serving people. I continue to marvel at how God works in and through the people of this congregation. Let me tell you of just one of such person. I have known Eleanor Green since my first days here thirteen years ago. She has always shown her love for God through music and serving. She and her husband, Jim, were active years ago with a traveling youth musical ministry called Caravan Players. Over thirty-three years ago Jim had a

devastating accident. He was crossing the street and was hit by the rear view mirror of a speeding truck. That event left this wonderfully creative man greatly impaired. After years of living at home, he now lives at a great care facility. For many reasons, Eleanor could chose to be bitter.

Rather she is a part of this colony of heaven in the country of death. Eleanor has chosen a lifestyle of thankfulness and generosity. Joy, healing, creativity, and service are her daily companions. Eleanor has served for years singing in the choir. She has invested her leadership gifts as a Deacon, an Elder, and joyfully designing and planning our worship services. For years, Jim and Eleanor would get in their car after worship and deliver bread and a smile to our first time guests who had come that day. Until recently, Eleanor worked professionally with senior adults at the Lititz Senior Center. This woman radiates with love. Thank you Eleanor and many others here who are committed to develop this colony of heaven in the country of death. On this Memorial Day weekend, I want to also thank all the men and women who have given their lives to bring freedom, justice, truth, and peace to our troubled world. Thank you.

Prayer: Thank you, Gracious God, for your love that penetrates the darkest nights and brings us hope and healing. Like newborn babies, we ask you to feed us today and in the days ahead with your Word of hope, love, and forgiveness. We offer our lives to you today. Shape us and use us as willing stones to build your kingdom. Send your Holy Spirit to flow through us, so we may declare anew the praises of him who brought us out of darkness, into your marvelous light.