

Sermon – A Time to Be Born
Sunday, May 10, 2020
Scripture: I Peter 2:1-10, John 14:1-6a
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Our first scripture reading I Peter 2:1-10 is a baptismal sermon. In this passage the author compares the new life in Christ to the birth and growth of an infant. He goes on to use the metaphor of living stones, emphasizing our connectedness as a family of God and the strength of our foundation which is Christ Jesus, the cornerstone. God's people are exhorted to the challenges which go hand in hand with the blessings of a new identity. Hear now the word of God.

1 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4 Come to Christ, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 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. 6 For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in Christ will not be put to shame." 7 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," 8 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. 9 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 Christ who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 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. Amen.

Our second reading is John 14:1-6a. This particular passage is a part of the Farewell Discourse, which is unique to John's gospel. Christ's concern is not so much on what will befall him. Rather, he is concerned about what will happen to the disciples who have become like children when the inevitable crisis of his absence occurs in his pending death. The first promise is the assurance of an abiding place with God. "In my father's house are many dwelling places." Jesus came into the world experiencing the painful reality of limited resources. When his mother was ready to give birth, there was no place at the inn. Jesus leaves this world with the assurance that it is not so with his Father's house, for heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all. Hear now God's holy word.

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Amen.

The title of the sermon: A Time to be Born

The text: Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people... 1 Peter 2:10a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, who bends down to lift infants, thank you for each of our births, for the mothers who brought us into the world, and for those who have nurtured us to become your people. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I remember the first time I read Psalm 131, a prayer of lament and hope. It was a sleepless night in my apartment in Pasadena, California where I was attending Fuller Theological Seminary. I was struggling with my call into ministry because of the surmounting obstacles before me and feeling defeated, worn down, lonely, and discouraged. After tossing and turning, I finally found my way into the living room and began reading the psalms, which I was drawn to during these days of spiritual struggle and coming into my own. These are the words I read:

*“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
O Israel, hope in God from this time forth and
forevermore.” (RSV)*

A thousand miles away from home, I imagined my mother's arms around me, holding me, quieting me, comforting me, not with words, but with herself... with her irreplaceable presence. Somehow in the memory of the reassuring presence of my mother, I experienced God's love anew and felt for the first time in a long time that it was well with my soul.

The profound influence of a mother in the child's 'becoming' is affirmed throughout Scripture. The author of First Peter compares the Christian life to a newborn baby longing for a mother's milk. The psalmist likens the comfort of God's presence to a child quieted at its mother's breast. The prophet Hosea affirms the God who bends down to lift infants and who teaches Ephraim to walk. First Peter borrows Hosea's metaphor to articulate the new identity in those who follow Christ: "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people." How true it is that those who raise us, who nurture us, and who teach us to walk shape the people we become. Where would we be without those who were there for us on our journeys to comfort, to encourage, to set limits, and to refine our character, that we might become God's own people, connected and grounded in the living cornerstone?

In the influence we have on our children's lives, may we build a strong foundation with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. As Christ has taught and modeled for us, we must be frank and honest with our children about life and faith, so they come to understand, as we have learned, that there is no privilege without responsibility and there are no blessings without challenges. If one chooses to live a faithful life, expect both glory and pain. We cannot promise a life without loss and disappointment. To do so would be a tremendous disservice to the children with whom we have been entrusted.

In her book Necessary Losses, American author and journalist Judith Viorst proposes that loss is universal and unavoidable. For each of us, there is a time to be born and a time to die. *Our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but also our illusions and expectations about them and ourselves.* Viorst contends that it is through our losses and the meaning we give them that we become the persons God intends, God's own people.

When Jesus departed from his disciples before his death and resurrection, he promised a new dimension of God's presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Jesus leaves this world with the assurance that there is room for everyone born in the next and affirms God has a place for us. We have a God who not only understands the necessary losses of life, but who also provides a way through these losses for us to become God's people. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we receive mercy, forgiveness, and the strength to forgive.

Mary Catherine Bateson, the only daughter of anthropologist Margaret Mead, reflects on the meaning and interpretation we give those interruptions and losses in a book entitled *Composing a Life*. She understands life as a work of art in progress and writes, *when there is a rent in the canvas, a discord in the harmony, a betrayal; it is important not only to recover but to discover a new and inclusive pattern of meaning. Part of the task of composing a life is the artist's need to find a way to take what is simply ugly and instead of trying to deny it, to use it in the broader design.*

During this rent in the canvas of our lives as we shelter in place persevering an unexpected interruption with losses, disappointments, uncertainties, and with a physical separation from friends and loved ones, may we find a way to give meaning to this experience in the broader design of our lives as the people of God. May we reach beyond ourselves and extend the mercy we have received by becoming creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace.

May we find our souls calmed and quieted in God's arms whose comfort is like that of a mother. May we give thanks for the mothers who brought us into the world during a time to be born and from whose arms we have come. May we hope in the God who created us, who joined us in our humanity, and who prepares a place for each of us. Amen.