

1 Peter 2:2-10: A Cascade of Metaphors

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Charles Brockwell tells me that a sermon on the Sunday after Derby should be “the most exciting two minutes in preaching.” Sorry I can’t quite match that pace.

Listen with me for God to speak to us through these words from 1 Peter, chapter 2.

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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.” ⁷To 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,” ⁸and “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. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Choose *one* scripture text to preach on.

Highlight *one* theological theme.

Offer your hearers *one* image to keep in their mind’s eye.

Give the congregation *one* word or phrase as a memorable takeaway.

I was taught those wise guidelines for effective preaching. And this morning we’re going to blatantly avoid most of them. Because our text from 1 Peter doesn’t let us be so constrained. Instead of a single image, for example, the writer offers a cascade of metaphors for what it means to be a community loved and called and transformed by the God of resurrection.

Lest you think it’s only other people’s guidelines that I’m willing to bend, I’m also diverting from one of my own best practices. You may have noticed that I often preach from narrative scripture passages. That’s simply because stories can be so compelling, so relatable. I’m more likely to have my heart changed by someone’s story than by even a well-reasoned argument.

Yet instead of the gospels or the history of Israel, here we are reading 1 Peter, one of those small letters near the back of the New Testament. While the writer identifies as the apostle Peter, scholars can’t say for sure if he’s the author or if someone later wrote in Peter’s name.

Regardless, this author wants to encourage people struggling to stay connected to one another and to the way of Christ while living in a hostile culture. The recipients of the letter were either Gentile believers in Jesus, or possibly Jewish Christians — because these verses are saturated with references to Hebrew scripture. Either way, the letter was sent to communities scattered around what’s now called Turkey.

And let's admit up front that other parts of 1 Peter can be tough to interpret for our time. Following today's verses are sections about gender relations and marriage, about dynamics between enslavers and those enslaved, and about suffering and abuse. There *can* be lifegiving ways to read Peter's advice in these areas. But it's also clear that our cultural understandings are so different that we may not be able to apply Peter's social teachings directly. For example, in chapter 3 he tells husbands to honor their wives, "knowing that she is the weaker partner" (3:7).

That is not how I — or anyone observant — would describe *my* partner. But egalitarian marriage would have been a foreign concept in Peter's time, so this writer upholds Christlike love in practical ways that the people he's addressing could understand.

Today let's stay here in chapter 2 with this cascade of metaphors and images. We may have a default image of Peter as that brash fisherman, the disciple with the big mouth, the one who jumps out of the boat trying to walk on water like Jesus. You know, a man's man.

And the first metaphor that Peter employs here is...maternal. Intimate. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk." We've got God as a nursing mother, and us believers as hungry newborns. In some other New Testament letters, breastfeeding images are used to connote immaturity of faith — you're not ready for solid food, so here's a little spiritual milk to get you started.

In this case, though, the divine mother's milk is that most potent of all foods, richly nourishing and craveable. I've watched the passion of breastfeeding babies — that's the kind of unrelenting partaking that Peter wants his readers to experience spiritually. Do we find ourselves craving God's good news like that? Yesterday at the coronation of King Charles, the moderator of the Church of Scotland (so one of our Presbyterian siblings) presented the king with a Bible and said, "These are the lively Oracles of God."

Long for God's lifegiving word, says 1 Peter, "so that by it you may grow into salvation."

My friend Amy Schacht recently preached a whole sermon series on this little letter of 1 Peter. About verse 2:2, Amy said

...we're told to long for this spiritual genuine milk *so we can grow into salvation*. Not so we can receive salvation. Not so we can believe in salvation. Not so we can be saved. But so we can *grow* into salvation, like the kid's shoes that are a size and half too big, so we have room for our feet to grow. The assumption 1 Peter makes is that we are not done. We are not cooked. We are not a finished product.¹

Hearing Amy talk about growing into salvation helped me pay new attention to this small but powerful piece of scripture.

And you, Highland, are partly responsible for that. About thirty years ago the same Amy Schacht was a seminary intern at this church. I know Patricia Connally remembers her, and maybe others of you do too. Amy tells me she preached her first-ever sermon from this very pulpit. I love that this church has long been in the business of not only calling pastors, but of calling *forth* pastors, helping people discover and live out their vocations. Amy went from here to become the

¹ Schacht, Amy. Sermon on 1 Peter 2:2-10, preached 30 April 2023. Laurel (MD) Presbyterian Church.

committed, candid, creative pastor of Laurel Presbyterian in Maryland. She and that church have been in partnership for an amazing 29 years. From what I hear, that community is growing into salvation together.

After language of breastfeeding and hungry babies, 1 Peter jumps to a masonry metaphor. Jesus Christ is the stone that was rejected and sent to crucifixion by the powers that be. God the master builder reclaims that same stone, brings him to resurrection life, and makes him the living cornerstone of a completely new structure that we can be part of.² Not everyone is ready to join this construction project; from the early church right up to now, plenty of people find the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be a stumbling block. But for those drawn to Christ, we can be assembled as living stones to build a spiritual house.

Masonry is usually a subtractive art: a mason breaks away parts of a stone to make it fit. But the image of a *living* stone offers so much more. A stone that's alive could be invited to grow larger to fill a certain space. Maybe a living stone can be transformed from one shape into another as the builder has need of that. A living stone could pay attention to its fellow stones and know when the building is suffering stresses.

I'm going to quote my friend Amy once more:

This passage is saying we are living stones that are being built, being grown, around the cornerstone of God's love in Christ. We are being built into a temple, so that others can know that unconditional, un-tarnishable, un-rejectable, saving love, too. [She goes on,] You know that game Jenga, where it's a solid stack of blocks, no danger of falling, each block securely stacked on the next. And the game is to see just how many blocks can be removed before the whole thing comes tumbling down. God is taking each of us, living stones, metaphorically having us lean on one another with Christ's love as the glue, so that we might be stronger, and others can join in, and discover another way to be in this world. The dilemma is this: Pull out one block, and we're okay. Pull out two, and we can probably keep standing as the Body of Christ. But pull out too many, and the whole thing comes crashing down. God's saving love in Christ doesn't work so well when there aren't blocks to glue together.³

We living stones all have different shapes and sizes and convictions, and sometimes we scrape or dislodge or hurt each other. But if we allow ourselves to be fitted close to each other, to let Christ's love bond us to one another even when we're uneasy about our differences, picture then the Spirit of God taking up residence in that metaphorical temple. Just like God's glory inhabited the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple.

Because this word from 1 Peter reveals Christ's salvation as radically communal. For me, that feels like the heart of this gospel news. We live this life of faith inclusively or not at all. Our living stones both rest on others and support others. It's like the famous African notion of *ubuntu*: a person is a person through other people. A Christian is a Christian through and with and for other people. So all the cascading metaphors that close out this passage are profoundly plural:

² Some of this language follows Fred Craddock in *First and Second Peter and Jude*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995. p. 37.

³ Schacht, Amy. Sermon on 1 Peter 2:2-10, preached 30 April 2023. Laurel (MD) Presbyterian Church.

...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that y'all may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called y'all out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (2:9-10)

What matters most is not how humans categorize or rank or reject each other. What matters most, says 1 Peter, is how God values the human family, starting with the once-rejected Christ and building from him a people, a church, called together to shine a light (yet another metaphor) because we know whose we are.

My wife Aimee and I enjoy the acclaimed TV show *Ted Lasso*, now in its third season. It's the story of an American college football coach, Ted, who for murky reasons gets hired to coach a British Premier League soccer club — the sport the rest of the world calls football. Most everybody expects Ted to fail, and his team does go through plenty of ups and downs. Yet Ted brings tenacious kindness and truthfulness and inspiration, inviting everyone around him to become their best selves.

In a recent episode Ted talks with his assistant coaches about a new strategy they're trying out that's called total football. It requires a much higher level of team collaboration as opposed to just counting on a star player or two to score goals. As they're talking Trent bursts into the room — he's a sportswriter who's long been observing Ted and the team.

Trent: "It's going to work! You haven't switched tactics in a week."

Ted: "I haven't?"

Trent: "No! You've done this over three seasons!"

Ted: "I have?"

Trent: "By slowly but surely building a club-wide culture of trust and support through thousands of imperceptible moments all leading to their inevitable conclusion: total football. It's going to work!"

Ted: "Well, how about that."

As people in my profession like to say: That'll preach. Slowly but surely building a culture of trust and support that makes a new thing possible. Or put in the language of 1 Peter: God's saving love is growing us into salvation, teaching us to trust that God is always nurturing us from death into resurrection life. All of us. All the time.

In the name of the Builder,
the Cornerstone,
and the Spirit who binds us.