

Look to the Rock That Will Last (A Sermon for Proper 16A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Isaiah 51:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

August 27, 2017

Chapter 51 of Isaiah's writings follows on the heels of the third of what are known as "the Servant songs" of Isaiah. In chapter 50, we heard the servant speak of the suffering, pain, humiliation and death he would suffer in order to bring light to the world.

Then we have today's reading. I invite you to listen to the first three verses:

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many."

God is calling on His chosen people, not to look at their present day situation and give in to despair, but to remember the promise that God made to their ancestors Abraham and Sarah.

God is calling them to look back. To look at the rock they came from.

God promised to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. God blessed him, and from one, he became many.

God promised him land and delivered him, and then again his descendants, to a land they could call their own.

Through Isaiah, God is telling people in the midst of great suffering to look back at the history of God's promises fulfilled.

So that's the first thing God wants to tell us. When we feel discouraged, or scared, or lost, look back. Look back at who you were, look back at where you were, and look back at what God

has done for you. Look back at the rocks you came from - Abraham and Sarah - and remember the rock of God's promise.

Then God tells us to look around.

Lift your eyes to the heavens and to look down at the earth beneath. All of this will pass away, the Lord says.

This made me think of this past Monday, eclipse day. Maybe I just missed it, but I didn't hear much about politics, or arguing, or any of that stuff on Monday. My Facebook feed was full of pictures of the eclipse from friends around the country. Pictures of groups of people, all looking together toward the heavens. I had my boys at a bounce house, and at 1:15 a group of us stopped what we were doing and walked outside and looked up.

But it didn't last.

By Tuesday morning, that union, that single focus on something bigger than us, was gone. And we were back to arguing over this and that and why we hate those other people.

Isaiah reminds us here that the things around us that we build to try to give us safety, our organizations, our institutions, our statues, even our church buildings...they won't last.

That's the second thing God wants us to know. When we feel discouraged or lost or scared, the troubles of this world won't last. But neither will the things we build to try to keep us safe, or the things we build to help us try to remember a former time. Look around, these rocks we imagine or these rocks we try to create ourselves won't last.

At the end of our reading today, God tells us what *will* last. God tells us what we can look forward to. "My salvation will be forever," says the Lord. When we want something that lasts, when we want something that endures, that is what we look to. We look to the Lord.

But there's somewhere else God tells us to look. It isn't included in the passage we read today, because for some reason the lectionary leaves it out. But everything I read agrees that it is part of this same message of the Lord that Isaiah shares. Right after we left off, with God saying that God's salvation will last forever, we have this:

*Listen to Me, you who already live out what is true and right,
who treasure My instruction within your hearts:
Don't be afraid of people's scorn.
Don't let their dismissive criticism, bitter anger, or hatred get you down.
For they'll come to nothing; they'll be eaten up as a moth eats a shirt;
they'll be consumed as a worm feeds on wool.
But My justice will endure. I will extend My saving action to every generation.*

Did you catch what God was saying there? "Listen to me...you who treasure My instruction within your hearts..."

God wants us to look back at where we've come from, look around at the things that won't last, and to look ahead to God's salvation.

But God also wants us to look within ourselves, to that place where we treasure God's instruction. To that place inside of us that knows God and loves Jesus and follows where the Holy Spirit leads us.

This is where I see a connection with today's Gospel reading.

We have Jesus, at Caesarea Philippi, and one of the dominant landmarks in that area is the Temple of Pan. If you've been to the Holy Land and seen it, it is this incredible cave in a rocky facade, surrounded by rocks, and shrines made of rocks.

This temple area was one of the main attractions of Caesarea Philippi, which was a hotbed of mythology and pagan worship. Here, perhaps in front of this shrine to pagan gods,

Jesus asks who people say he is. The disciples say John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or other prophets.

Then Jesus asks again, who do people say that I am? Simon Peter answers: “You are the messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Bingo.

In that moment, Simon Peter got it right. In that moment, the disciples knew. In that moment, Simon Peter confessed that Jesus Christ is the rock, not these shrines and statues symbols that were rising up all around them.

But Jesus went deeper. I can imagine the scene. Jesus walks closer to Simon Peter, and in my mind he points at his chest. Simon, he says, you’re right. In your deepest heart you know the Rock. In your deepest heart you know the thing that will last. In your deepest heart you know that my only my healing, my wholeness, my salvation will never end.

And then Jesus renamed him. Jesus named him Rocky. Your name is Peter, he says, and on this rock - on this deep-in-the-heart knowledge that I AM Lord, Jesus says, I will build my church.

Then I imagine Jesus looking around, pointing to the shrines and statues and symbols surrounding this temple of Pan, this cave of Pan, this gate of hell, and Jesus says none of this will last. None of this will win. None of this will overcome that truth that is now buried in your heart.

Jesus is Lord.

That is the truth we need to know. But the thing is, when we know that truth, when we believe that truth, *we* become the rock. *We* become the Church. *We* become the hope in the world.

“Who do you say that I am?” Don’t just answer Jesus’ question with words. Don’t just answer Jesus’ question by reciting a creed. And don’t even answer Jesus’ question with prayer.

Go live the answer.

Live with hope in the midst of fear. Practice generosity in a culture of scarcity. Love your neighbor as yourself. Care for the poor, feed the hungry, and defend the oppressed. Offer forgiveness despite your anger. Love your enemies. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

These are the things that will last.

Do these. Discover the rock that Jesus knows you to be, the rock that is deep within you. And go be the rock on which Jesus’ church stands before the world.

And when you do...when *we* do...the fear and the anger and the pain and the division and the gates of hell will never prevail.

Amen.