

5th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.7.23

1 Peter 2:2-10

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 him, 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 him 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 him 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.

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "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. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father?" ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (577)

We're on the night of Jesus' arrest. Though it's the season of Easter, we're here also on the night of Jesus' arrest, the night before his death. You thought Eastertide would be all about the Resurrection? (I did. I always forget about being tossed back in time.)

This is the Farewell Discourse, a long speech Jesus is remembered to have proffered. John alone remembers Jesus doing this. John's gospel is singular in remembering Jesus as someone who was amazingly articulate about what exactly was going on—with him, with the world, with God. In

the Gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel written, Jesus barely speaks at all. In the Gospel of John, the latest one written, that's one of the principal things Jesus does: he speaks.

Of course, John remembers Jesus as the word of God, the *logos* of God made flesh. He was the logic of God made material, and as such he might be a model for any who'd seek such a thing as to how to *do* this. Life in God. Being in God.

It's as if, with time, the mystery that played out in the Christ event became something people could think about, could give word to. By the time this gospel was written, around the turn of the first century, people had had enough time to think through what all it might mean, what all it might suggest and make possible.

And Jesus had had time, too. Again, in Mark, Jesus' start as the Messiah seems to have been at his baptism, when he was an adult, meaning all of this was news to him as much as it was to everyone else. But John understood Jesus as manifesting an aspect of God that had been with God in the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being with him, and without him not one thing came into being..." It's as if, in having all the time in the world, this Word-of-God-become-flesh-in-Jesus had had time to think it all through, to come to terms.

The thing is, sometimes articulating everything doesn't really clarify much. Words can confound as much as they might clarify. Stephen, for one, was still confused. Philip, for another, was as well. "Show us the Father," he said to Jesus, as if Jesus hadn't been showing him the Father all along.

He had been.

But he would do so all the more fully soon enough. He would hang from the cross. Poured out. Self-giving. *Kenosis* is the Greek word: self-emptying for the sake of fullness of life. That's the Father, a self-emptying, self-sacrificing God, poured out in order that the world might become full of God.

Is the chalice sad when we've all drunk of its contents?

As to the reason why Jesus was able to show them all the Father: it's because the Father dwelt in Jesus just as Jesus dwelt in the Father. *Meno* is the Greek word for it. *Meno*, *menos*, abide, dwell, remain, stay, a word John's gospel deploys thirty-four times. This amounts to two times every three chapters. It's a central concept here. That Jesus *abides* in God, that God *dwells* in Jesus, that the disciples are encouraged to allow God to *reside* in them, and that the disciples might manage this by *staying* with Jesus: thirty-four times this gospel encourages this in-dwelling, this seeking

shelter and finding abode and enjoying a house with many dwelling places, this thing that we (any of us) might enjoy, might indeed *do*, though by ceasing for a moment from all our doing.

A podcast I listen to on the lectionary passages always has three biblical scholars discussing the coming week's texts. One of them is a scholar on John, and the other two often tease her about this book. "The whole 'abide' thing. How's a preacher supposed to advise her people about how to abide?" they often ask. I always think I must be missing something. It just doesn't seem that hard to me. To abide in God: this actually seems like the easiest thing in the world. To abide in God is a matter of stopping doing things.

That said, I was doing this stopping doing once. In a library, I think, at school, in college. A friend came by and saw me sitting there and said, "What are you doing? You look like you're waiting for a bus."

So there's that.

You might remember the time when, according to the Gospel of John, Mary and Martha called on Jesus because their brother Lazarus was sick and dying.

He would die soon, just a couple days.

This was an urgent situation.

Things were dire.

So, they sent for Jesus.

But he was a-ways away from the village where they all lived, where Lazarus was now dying. The story, though, tells us Jesus remained where he was for two more days. The story indeed makes a point of telling us, he *remained* there for two more days.

And people wonder, why did he tarry? Indeed, Mary and Martha pressed on him when at last he arrived, why didn't he come straight away? Maybe Lazarus wouldn't have died if he hadn't dilly-dallied once word had reached him.

Maybe.

Or maybe it's that he managed to do what he managed do, which was nothing less than to raise Lazarus from the dead, *because* he'd remained where he was, *because* he stayed in a moment of *meno*, whereby God comes fully to *menos* in him, whereby then God can come fully to *meno* in the world, Jesus as a vessel filled up with God and then poured out.

Take a minute. Take a beat. At a boundary awareness training I attended for clergy, the leader of the group said it's useful for him to remember that there's nothing a pastor can do for anyone that requires rushing. We're not EMTs. As much as we'd like to think of ourselves as so

essential, exactly what any and everyone needs at the press of any moment, there's in reality little a pastor can do that requires instant action.

Which can itself be a pastoral gift. Which can itself be the gift of the church to the world. "Remember, you have a brake pedal," I sometimes think as I watch people drive over each other on the roads, as I myself might be driving over other people on the roads: "Remember, you have a brake pedal."

The staying, the remaining, this *quality* of abiding and being an abode: this is perhaps the thing that made it so Jesus could be the Christ at all.

"The Sound of Music." Do you know the movie as well as I do? When the Nazis are at the convent gate, they're ringing, they're pounding. They're looking for Captain Von Trapp who had recently escaped with his family, who was just now driving madly through the streets of Vienna to get to the border. The nuns are nervous. They've helped him get away, nervous though for him, not for themselves. They *want* him to get away. The two whose job it is to answer at the gate scurry nervously. Their mother superior sees them scurry past and she counsels them, "Slow. Slow." The gift of the Church.

It's so hard to hear the Gospel of John. It's so hard to hear it as it's meant to be heard, because it's so easy to hear it otherwise. It's so easy to hear it as a religious text, as a text that's prescribing a certain religious doctrine, urging upon the world a certain religion and to the exclusion of all the other religions. Jesus is the way, the truth, the life, which seems to say that all the other religious figures are not the way, are not the truth, are not the life.

But this is to hear Jesus saying "I am" as a personal assertion, something exclusive about him as a religious figure rather than something about his way of being that manifests the way, the truth, the life. But, of course, his saying "I am" isn't him making a personal statement about himself, some declaration about what he alone is like or makes present. His saying "I am" is his calling on the being of God, evoking it, this name that is the ancient of names.

I Am is the name God gave Godself back when first asked, "What is your name?" Moses asked it, in the wilderness, when he'd begun to discern a call to return to Egypt to free the enslaved there. He saw a bush that burned though was never consumed—which is one of those biblical images that's been reduced to the funny, the silly, the stuff of Sunday school felt boards. But listen, a bush that burns though is never consumed isn't just a show of something amazing to get your attention. No, it's the very image of sustained being, the very revelation of being that

sustains its own being. Never to consume anything as fuel, never eventually then to burn itself out, this bush is the picture of being, the picture of God.

And the voice to speak from it, of which Moses asked, “Whom shall I say sent me? What is your name?” said this was the Name, YHWH, four Hebrew letters which scholars have come to call the Tetragrammaton, though this, all sharp consonants and too many syllables, betrays the whole point—for YHWH is meant rather to be the sound of breath, the sound of nearly nothing which is though everything essential. It’s then interpreted in the story itself, the voice going on to explain what it means, “I AM,” or “I AM that I AM,” which is to say I AM BEING.

Being whose fuel for being is being, who would later in scripture offer other images for such being: a holy mountain where the lion shall lie down with the lamb, where the wolf and the kid shall dwell together, where none shall hurt or destroy, but instead all shall live and dwell to be neither predator nor prey, neither ravenous nor made food, but all just being, just peacefully being.

Which is impossible, I know. The way things are: the structure of reality: I know. But what if we were to live *as if*? Just try it sometimes. Just hold out that hope, that vision.

When Jesus says, “I am” about himself, which he says a lot according to the Gospel of John—I am the living water. I am the true vine. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. Or this one, which we heard him say this morning, I am the way, the truth, and the life.—he’s not making a personal assertion. He is evoking God as being, *invoking* God to be in himself. He is evoking and invoking God so to become himself a dwelling place for God and for entering into God as a dwelling place for himself and for those who’d follow him, for those who’d attach themselves to him.

It was an attachment though that would soon suffer a severing. Which I know. Which I know. I’ve done this before. I’ve traveled through the Church year before. So, I don’t know why it always comes as a surprise, that Eastertide would throw us back into Holy Week as well, that this season of Easter isn’t all about Resurrection appearances, surprised then happy disciples, that there is also this, another separation, another leave-taking.

Eastertide is seven weeks long, and it ends with a scene remembered in the gospel of Luke, Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of the Father while the apostles all stood there looking up.

Now what?

He was among us, living, teaching, healing, wandering around. He was taken from us, crucified, horrible, *horrible*. Then he was back. And now he’s gone again...?

Now what?

The other reading we heard this morning was from the First Letter of Peter, not a book we hear from much. It's short, and it's not all that urgent. It's not a Pauline letter, one that Paul wrote back in the earliest days after Jesus lived, back when congregations were gathering, and Paul was working like a maniac all over the Mediterranean region to gather them (these congregations, in Corinth, in Philippi, in Rome) and to keep them from imploding or eating themselves alive.

Conflict among gathered people can really devour, burn itself out until there's nothing left. Sometimes that's the only way. Ash among the few things that doesn't burn.

Paul's letters were, the lot of them, each to some specific congregation in some specific place that was suffering some specific conflict or otherwise puzzlement.

First Peter isn't a letter going to some specific place, is rather a general letter for a general audience, congregations that were settled enough and were now accepting new members. They needed instruction as to what this new membership might imply. These newest members, like newborn infants, needed guidance as to what this new attachment was all about—attachment to other new Christians, attachment through them to the whole mystical body of Christ, which was attachment to Christ himself, who was attachment to the God that is Being, mere Being.

This is all to say there's very little that's actually required. This new way, this new faith: there's very little that's actually required. You don't have to stay up on the night of the new moon or wear an amulet you burnished in the ancient fire or sacrifice the stag of the twelve-horned antler. There's no magic here; there are no spirits among the creation that you need to summon or to ward off just so. (The newborn Christians for this now more established church weren't coming from among the Hebrews but from among the pagans.) All there is, is Being, and Being together, with a hope for balanced Being in which none are hurt or destroyed, none are sacrificed or cast out in some felt-to-be-holy rite. There is only Being, and Being together—which, turns out is harder than it sounds, but for its being very simple.

In the rite of remembrance that we gather in around the Lord's table, we remember not as a mental act but as an effective act, an active act, an act of actualization. To re-member is to re-attach, just as to dis-member is to detach.

What's more, to remember is indeed to not forget, or to stop forgetting, which is itself the meaning of *aletheia*, translated "truth," an unforgetting or to stop forgetting.

In the rite of remembrance that we're about to gather in around the Lord's table to eat of bread that, broken, gathers us in and to drink of a cup that, poured out, fills us each and all, we're

enacting something. And it's not required but is rather offered as a manifestation of the reality that abides. Our very being is an expression of God as Being, and our Being together is a foreseeing of God's glorious aim.

So, come. Taste. See that the Lord is good.

Thanks be to God.