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5th Sunday of Easter
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
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Living God, help us so to hear your Holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

REJECTED, LIVING STONES

1 PETER 2:2-10

Today, the church, as Christ's body, a living organism, should be gathering outside. It is appropriate to do so any Lord's Day, but especially this one. Since 1970, the Earth Day has been celebrated worldwide on April 22. With each celebration, a pattern is further established, a pattern that sustains---and is sustained by---the Earth Day Network, whose mission is "to grow and diversify" this movement through "education, politics, events and social activism." In Tuscaloosa, Earth Fest is being sponsored by the Creative Campus Initiative and the Alabama Environment Council. This afternoon, festivities will be taking place on the Quad that will feature everything from live bands to organic vegetarian cuisine. Who knows? It may be more fun than a session or committee meeting, even though it is considerably longer than any of them. It began at 10 a.m. (while we were meditating on the sinfulness of Alabama's taxes) and will conclude at 7 p.m. (at which time some of our Christian neighbors will be gathering to worship again). If you passed through the fellowship hall this morning, you may have noticed that *that* part of the building feels naked, vulnerable or otherwise exposed; that is because the tables that are normally there are worshipping on the Quad today.

You laugh (or at least you were supposed to laugh), and yet when I read this passage from 1 Peter, I find myself searching the Scriptures for the scene in which God's people are

assured that in the face of human doubt and disobedience, God will be worshiped, because, in this event, “even the rocks will cry out.” At first, I remember this phrase as a Psalm (when in doubt about the whereabouts of a phrase as beautiful as this one, I usually go the Psalms), but it is not. The phrase appears in Luke’s Gospel. It is part of the Passion/Palm Sunday narrative. Jesus comes to Jerusalem on a colt. The Pharisees ask Jesus to silence the crowd that is screaming, “Hosanna,” and Jesus laughs them off by saying, “I tell you, if these (disciples) were silent, the stones would shout out.”

So this phrase is not from a Psalm, and yet the song that the disciples are singing---the one that the Pharisees ask Jesus to silence---is: “Blessed is the Sovereign, who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!” This is the language of Psalm 118; and in the stanza before this one, the psalmist cries out, “Thank you, God, for answering me. You have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Notice the language of becoming. Faith does not come in a box; it is much more organic than that. God plants; faith grows, even as we wither according to the seasons of our lives. “This is the Lord’s doing,” proclaims the psalmist, “it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Ah...another familiar phrase...the God of grace comforts us, even as God’s Spirit summons us to worship.

The PC(USA) has declared today Earth Sunday in the church. At first sight, this may seem as if the church is accommodating the culture rather than transforming it; and I suppose, on some level, it is, and yet everything in the world is *not* all bad. In the liturgy of one of the creation stories, God creates this and God creates that, and at every stop along the way, Scripture proclaims that it was good. Was: past tense...before the fall, when forbidden fruit dangled from trees of knowledge of good and evil...in the Garden of Eden, every Sunday was Earth Sunday, because the human beings who inhabited the earth were as pure as the earth

that they inhabited. The desecration that follows is not the earth's fault; sin belongs to the human beings to whom God entrusted the earth's care. The excesses that corrupt our relationships with God and each other corrupt our relationships with the earth. The Call to Worship (which, by the way, was provided by the Office of the General Assembly) does a marvelous job of exposing us as the idol makers that we are by reminding us that the God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines of our creation. This Call to Worship reads like a prayer of confession, and the sin of which we are guilty is acting as if we are the Creator when we are, in fact, God's creation, less powerful than we fool ourselves into believing and more loved than we are capable of loving.

Our relationship with the earth is one of interdependence. Sure, we are capable of destroying the earth, but at what gain? It is quite possible to consume one's self into extinction, and should we do that, the earth will survive (unless we go nuclear). Our relationship with the earth is unusual in that this is one circumstance in which it is natural for the mother to survive her children. Earth Day feels like Mother's Day to me, and who knows? Maybe the author of 1 Peter would agree. The faith that he describes in the beginning of this section of Scripture is organic and maternal: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation---if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

There is an image to revisit when we gather around the Lord's Table. The longing does not begin *until* one has tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Until then, I wonder how one feels: Empty? Restless? Distraught? Numb? I do not know. I do not remember being an infant. It is impossible to know, and the fact that we do not know---that we are incapable of remembering---may be further evidence of God's grace. What if we had known what we were missing? Wouldn't we have been hungrier, thirstier, more restless, more distraught, more at wit's end than we were? Now that we have tasted that the Lord is good, it is that yearning that

compels us to accept the invitation to the Lord's Table. Now that we are conscious of our impurity, it is that longing for the purity of Christ's love that compels us to lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. Now that we are listening to God's promise that the best is yet to come, God's grace feels irresistible, because it is. It is pure and life-giving, as innocent and loving as a mother who nestles a baby to a lactating breast.

"Come to Christ a living stone," says 1 Peter, "though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight." The adjectives here are incisive. The stones about which 1 Peter speaks (i.e. the church, you and I) are living and rejected. On Tuesday, at the Bible study before the Food Pantry opened, John Whitehead provided a through and in-depth analysis of the odd juxtaposition of the words "living" and "stones." Stones are anything but vibrant. We associate them with death, not life, and yet this is the language that 1 Peter chooses. Scripture then exhorts us to let ourselves "be built into a spiritual house (that's stones of different shades, shapes and sizes and theological and political dispositions, one house), to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Then 1 Peter bursts into Psalm.

Being at that Bible study, which I experienced as deep, wrestling with Scripture, was powerful. Initially, I found myself asking, "What else is there to say?" Maybe I should ask for his notes and preach this sermon from them. All that I could think of was being at a worship service about a year ago. The minister was preaching on a Scripture with multiple references to stones. The title of the sermon, as she conceived it, was "Throwing Stones and Living Stones," but the title, as it appeared in the Order of Worship, was, "Throwing Stones and Living Stoned." Oh, she had some explaining to do, and the congregation will never let the administrative forget this faux pas.

Compared to what takes place here every Tuesday, that funny story is simply that---a story that helps us to laugh at ourselves, a story that helps us to laugh at the comedy that punctuates our life together as the church---and yet that may be precisely the point: In God's sight, nothing is insignificant. All that God creates and re-creates in Christ's image is meaningful and valuable, even stones and especially death.

Maybe Earth Day