

## Upon This Rock

“Upon this rock...” The people of God, it seems, are always looking for a rock to stand on. The Children of Israel thought they’d finally found theirs when their charismatic and heroic young king, David, captured the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made the rocky top of Mount Zion his capital. This sense of political security was seemingly ratified in the next generation when David’s wise son, Solomon, established the Temple of Yahweh on that same mountain. The seats of divine and earthly power were co-located for the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah and all, apparently was right in God’s creation.

But Jerusalem, of course, fell and that temple was destroyed, just as all earthly temples are eventually destroyed. The people of Israel forgot that there had been other mountains, other rocks, just as important to them as Zion before the times of David and Solomon and their successors. They forgot that David had been anointed by a prophet who came out of the ancient worship place of Shiloh, where the Ark of the Presence of God had resided. They forgot that Moses had seen God and talked with God and received Torah on Mount Sinai. They forgot that the father of their tribes, Jacob, had laid his head on a rock and dreamed a dream of a stairway into heaven at a place that came to be called Beth-el, the house of God. They forgot that Abraham, the friend of God, had begun his journey with visions of God in Ur of the Chaldees and in Haran.

But God never ceased to be in any of those places, on any of those mountains, within any of those rocks, for God is accessible to God’s people wherever they may go. When Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Judah were marched off to Babylon, God was there. When they returned to Zion and wept over the ruins and when they rebuilt the walls and a simpler temple and wept again, God was still there. God was there with them when they reconsecrated the temple after the mad Seleucid emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, had it desecrated. God was there with them when the Romans marched in.

And God was with God’s people all across the Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent as the Jews scattered across that part of the world under the Persian and the Hellenistic and the Roman empires. God was even in the Gentile region of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus took his disciples there away from the crowds to a rocky cliff on the slope of Mount Herman, a place where the River Jordan began in a spring that gushed from a cave dedicated to the worship of Pan, an ancient god of fear and wild things, a cave that some believe was nicknamed “The Gates of Hades” because it seemed to descend into the very underworld abode of the dead.

In that unlikely place, Jesus, too, spoke of rocks and foundations in a way that has caused his followers to question what he meant for at least 500 years now. And so, Christians have continued to look for the mountain and the rock where they could claim to have their spiritual home. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple of Yahweh yet again, the seats of spiritual power spread with the refugees. Some of those mighty metropolitan sees are now nearly or completely abandoned by Christians, almost forgotten: Antioch, Alexandria, Hippo, Nineveh, Tabriz, Basra, Samarkand, Nicaea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople. And God’s restless children, the disciples of Jesus, the members of Body of Christ, have continued to take their stand on rocks and hills to say, “Here, here is where the truth lives.” Rome, Wittenberg, Geneva, Canterbury, Plymouth, Providence, Philadelphia, Nashville, Valley Forge, Atlanta, Salt

## Upon This Rock

Lake City, Azusa... Each generation, each denomination, each sect finds its own place to plant a flag and say, "Here but not there."

It seems rather a long way from the unity for which Jesus prayed, doesn't it? And it is an ironic sort of counter-point to what initially attracted me to the passage I read to you earlier as a focus for this morning's worship. You see, I've left my usual adherence to the Revised Common Lectionary readings for this morning to jump ahead twenty-four hours. Tomorrow, many of our more liturgical sisters and brothers will celebrate the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul and the lectionary committee suggests this Gospel reading for that celebration, balanced by a reading from the second letter of Paul to Timothy in which the old man, perhaps for the last time, asserts his own apostolic *bona fides*. Peter and Paul – for me, and perhaps for some of the rest of you, this pairing represents the great division of Christians in the West between Catholics and Protestants, between Rome, on the one hand, and Wittenberg and Canterbury and the rest on the other. How wonderful to have a feast day in at least part of the Body of Christ to remember and celebrate them together!

It is a reminder, for me, of that ecumenical imperative of which I've so often spoken in this place, the idea that, for all our differences in belief and practice, we are still One Body under One Head and Lord of All, that we ought to celebrate rather than merely tolerate each other for in such a spectrum of ways God speaks to the spectrum of people that God created. The older (and hopefully wiser) I get, the longer that I seek to walk in the way of Jesus, the more years I spend as a pastor, the more convinced I become that denominational diversity does not have to be a curse of disunity, that instead it is a God-given blessing of diversity. Not all of us want to sing praise songs. Not all of us want to hold hymnals filled with hymns written in past centuries. Not all of us respond to the repeated rituals of the Mass and the Hours. Not all of us can deal with the wild and sometimes chaotic freedoms espoused by our Baptist tradition. We are different – thanks be to God!

Different and yet similar enough to be able to learn from each other. Indeed, similar enough that we MUST learn from each other. We need both the structure and continuity in our faith that the Catholics attribute to the Petrine inheritance and the freedom that we Baptists claim to have learned from Paul, just as we need the faith preached by Paul and the works held up by James. I would be very much the poorer in my beliefs, in my practice, and in my preaching if I did not continue to study and learn from theologians, clergy, and laypeople from across the Christian spectrum. Even though, as a staunch Baptist, I would never bend the knee to a Bishop of Rome and have deep theological differences with all of them with whose work I am familiar, I have learned from and respect each one I have studied and particularly those within my own lifetime. I thank God for the questing, wide-open spirit of John XXIII and for the careful commitment to reform shown by his successor, Paul VI. Like many others around the world, I was charmed by the wit and openness of John Paul I and deeply saddened by his sudden death. Many of the policies of John Paul II made my hackles rise but I could not but be impressed with his personal piety, with his courage and tenacity in battling atheistic communism, and with his grace and forgiveness towards the man who attempted to kill him. For all my disagreements with the conservatism of Benedict XVI, I was likewise deeply moved by the grace and courage he showed in his resignation as well as by the emphasis he put on love in his encyclicals. And, of

## Upon This Rock

course, in Pope Francis, I find a Roman prelate with whom I may actually agree more than I disagree.

But whether or not I agree with these brothers is not entirely the point. I thank God for them because, through the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, they have become the spiritual leaders for some 1.2 billion of my fellow Christians around the world. No matter how much I might want to argue that the faith of the early church is better preserved in Valley Forge than in the Vatican, these men ARE my brothers in Christ, doing their best to give God the glory, praying for God's wisdom to guide them as they lead the largest of Christ's flocks through this vale of tears.

Not only that but I give thanks for those Catholic leaders and Orthodox leaders and Lutheran and Anglican and Presbyterian and Methodist and Quaker and Pentecostal and Latter-Day Saints leaders and all the rest because I fully realize that I do not have all the truth of God. And neither do they. And neither does any created being but when we talk together, when we listen to each other, when we respect and tolerate and, yes, love each other, we get a little bit closer to the amazing, blessed reality of the Kingdom of God.

This spirit of ecumenical love and learning is not just important for our life "in the church." This is not just something that preachers need to think about. Because I am convinced that this same spirit of peace is what is most badly needed in our world right now. It is the ultimate answer for the seemingly everlasting problem of tribalism.

Of all the "-isms" that plague our world, I think tribalism is the worst for it encompasses them all. Tribalism, essentially, is the acted out belief that no one who is outside of our group is fully human, they don't matter, we can disregard them and even kill them. We don't have to look across the oceans to the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans or the genocidal conflict between Hutus and Tutsis or to the atrocities of the so-called Islamic State in Syria to know the truth of this. We don't have to look to the years ago past of our own country, to the elimination of the First Nations of this land or to the enforced slavery of Africans or to the crippling discrimination against Irish and Italian immigrants to see tribalism at work. All we have to do is read yet again the reports of how women are denied equality in pay for men doing the same work. All we have to do is to open our newspapers and read of how drug laws and their enforcement have become the "New Jim Crow," imprisoning men of color and stripping them of their constitutional rights in numbers hideously out of proportion to the penalties for white men guilty of the same crimes. All we have to do to see tribalism at work is to turn on our television sets and hear the heart-felt eulogy that our President delivered for a pastor and elected official (you don't think that felt a little close to home at my house) who was cut down by a hate-filled young man because he and his flock didn't belong to the right tribe. All we have to do is to open up our Facebook accounts and read the posts from people who are going out of their minds because people who aren't part of their tribe have been accorded equal rights to marry by the Supreme Court of this land. It is tribalism and it is hatred.

And, it is ungodly. God loves everybody. God loves the whole world so much that God gave God's only begotten son... And that man, rightly identified by Peter as Son of the Living God, Jesus said to us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,

## Upon This Rock

and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” And Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And Jesus said, “Love your enemy,” which members of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston understood and forgave Dylan Roof. And God told Moses to tell the Israelites, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt,” and again, “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We are called by God and by the Son of God to love even those who are different from us, love with no exceptions. And as a nation, we are doing a pretty poor job of it.

With all respect and love to my sisters and brothers of the Church of Rome, I don’t think that Jesus was installing Peter and his spiritual heirs as the earthly heads of the Church that day in Caesarea Philippi. That’s the sort of thinking that leads to tribalism unless you are very, very careful. I am of the mind of the generations of Protestant theologians who have pointed to the faith that Peter showed in making his declaration about Jesus as the rock upon which the Church is built. This means that we don’t have to go looking for the rock that we can stand on. We don’t have to choose between Bethel or Shiloh or Sinai or Zion. We don’t have to fly the flag of Rome or Wittenberg or Geneva or Canterbury. We don’t have to defend the honor of Valley Forge or Nashville or Atlanta, to name three of the centers of the often-squabbling Baptist Movement in the U.S. All of those who seek to walk in Jesus’ way stand on the rock, the rock of their belief that he is the Son of the Living God.

There is at least one more related idea in this little pericope that I want to touch on this morning. In verse 19, Jesus says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Whether he says this just to Peter, as a promise to future Bishops of Rome, or to all 12 of the disciples, as a promise to all Christians, isn’t clear from the Greek but, as you might suspect, I prefer the latter possibility. And I have heard, over the years, Christians claiming the truth of this verse as some sort of supernatural weapon used, once again, against those not of their tribe.

But lately, a new interpretation, which I find preferable for many reasons, has begun to circulate. What if Jesus was affirming not our power over the sins and ultimate fates of others, which does seem a little unlikely, but rather affirming our power over our own choices, our ability to let go of the things that bind us, reminding us that we, by accepting the grace of God, can appear before the throne of Heaven as free and unburdened children of God? Being reminded of God’s loving offer to cast all our sins into the sea, would we choose instead to drag all of our sins and brokenness, all of our bad choices and rebellions, all of the things for which we are sorry and sad, into the very presence of the Holy One? And yet, we continually burden ourselves, like the central character of Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress, that classic of Christian devotion written by English Baptist John Bunyan in gaol, with a huge pack of that which we have done and left undone. We must remember, my sisters and brothers, that we are free, that Love has given us the tune we need to dance, the lift we need to leap, the mercy which unstraps our baggage.

## Upon This Rock

On Christ, the Solid Rock, we stand. We may trace God's love and provision for God's people through those other rocks – Zion and Sinai, Bethel and Shiloh, the hills of Rome or the lowlands of Valley Forge – but it is on the Rock of Ages where we may safely take our stand. It is with the work and teaching of Jesus where we find our surest footing and in particular with his words of God's love, offered freely to all comers. There are no tribes, there are no races, there are no creeds, there is no division. There is only God's love offered through the Son of the Living God, Jesus of Nazareth, our rock in a weary land. Thanks be to God.