

## Welcome and Announcements – Ashland Presbyterian Church, April 26, 2020

**Prelude:** *Jesu! Where'er Thy People Meet*

*Jesu! Where'er Thy people meet,  
There they behold thy mercy seat;  
Where'er they seek Thee, Thou art found,  
And ev'ry place is hallowed ground.*

**Opening Prayer:** Following Psalm 16 (Every week in Eastertide – through May 24)

*Song of Trust and Security in God*

<sup>1</sup> Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

<sup>2</sup> I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;  
I have no good apart from you.”

<sup>3</sup> As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,  
in whom is all my delight.

<sup>4</sup> Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;  
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out  
or take their names upon my lips.

<sup>5</sup> The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.

<sup>6</sup> The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.

<sup>7</sup> I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.

<sup>8</sup> I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.

<sup>10</sup> For you do not give me up to Sheol,  
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

<sup>11</sup> You show me the path of life.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

**Opening Hymn:** *The Church's One Foundation*

1. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; She is His new creation,  
by Spirit and the Word:  
From Heav'n He came and sought her to be His holy bride,  
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.

2. Elect from ev'ry nation, yet one o'er all the earth, Her charter of salvation, one  
Lord, one faith, one birth;  
One holy Name she blesses, partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses, with ev'ry grace endued.

3. 'Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war, She waits the consummation  
of peace forevermore;  
Till with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.

## Scripture reading: Excerpts from 1 Peter Chapter 2 (NRSV)

### The Living Stone and a Chosen People

<sup>2</sup> Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.”

<sup>7</sup> 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,”

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

### *Live as Servants of God*

<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. <sup>12</sup> Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

*13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

### **The Example of Christ's Suffering**

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup> For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

<sup>23</sup> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

### **Sermon Series: The Path of Life**

Each week in Eastertide will be a reflection on "The Path of Life" for Christians going through 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. Psalm 16 will be our guiding prayer each week too.

April 19: Show Me the Path of Life, 1 Peter 1, Psalm 16

**April 26: Honor Everyone. Fear God. Honor the Emperor. (God and Governments),**

**1 Peter 2, Psalm 16**

May 3: Tender Hearts; Humble Minds (God and Relationships), 1 Peter 3, John 10:10b

May 10: Speaking the Very Words of God (God and Suffering), 1 Peter 4; John 14:6

May 17: Tend the Flock in Your Charge (God and the Church) 1 Peter 5; John 14:15

May 24: Waterless Springs and Mist in the Storm (God and False Prophets) 2 Peter 1&2

## **Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

## **Closing Hymn: *O God, Our Help in Ages Past***

1 O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast  
And our eternal home.

2 Before the hills in order stood  
Or earth received its frame  
From everlasting Thou art God  
To endless years the same.

## **Sending us out to be God's Word in the World:**

Every hand that we don't shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should that need arise. —*Rabbi Yosef Kanevsky of Los Angeles*

**Response:** *May the Grace of Christ our Savior* (Tune: Sardis by Ludwig van Beethoven)

*May the grace of Christ our Savior,*

*And the Father's boundless love,*

*With the Holy Spirit's favor,*

*Rest upon us from above. Amen.*

## **A Blessing of Eastertide**

**Postlude:** *Christ is Our Cornerstone* (Tune: Harwood by S. S. Wesley)

*Christ is our cornerstone, On Him alone we build;  
With His true saints alone The courts of Heaven are fill'd:  
On His great love our hope we place Of present grace and joys above.*

**Honor Everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the Emperor.**

Does the Bible have anything to teach us about our public lives?

Does the Bible give us any clues as to how we might have a Christian stance either for or against governments?

This is a dangerous topic – I know.

Our nation is as polarized as I've ever seen it in my lifetime.

And now we are scared for our lives on top of that.

It is a potentially combustible time. It seems as though at any moment our whole world could go up in flames.

What is the Christian to do?

Dare I say that it's not the first time in the two thousand + years of Christianity that this has come up.

In the first century, when the community of Jesus followers was trying to figure out who they were going to be, the early Roman Emperors of recent memory included Caligula -known for his cruelty, sadism, extravagance and sexual perversion, and Nero – who sent a campaign into Galilee in 67 CE to stamp out the Jewish rebellion against Rome's crushing taxes and later was thought to have set Rome on fire just to watch it burn. And it's quite possible that this letter was actually written during the period of Domitian's rule as Emperor when the beginnings of Christian persecution and subsequent martyrdom were in the air.

I tell you this to give a bit of context for the statement “Honor the Emperor” that shows up in this text. This letter was not written during the reign of Constantine, when Christianity was co-opted to be an asset to imperial rule. This was written in a time when it was potentially dangerous to be a known follower of Jesus’ way. And any thoughts against the Roman Empire were going to be quickly punished by the kinds of cruel execution already intimately known to Jesus’ followers.

Therefore, the author of this letter was giving spiritual leadership to this new band of disciples, and at the same time had to be concerned deeply for their safety.

To learn what this letter has to say for our own times is to be acutely aware of both that context and our own. Christianity has had a privileged place in Western culture for some time now and has gained great wealth and power through multiple empires and the expansions of colonialism. In the Western world and often beyond it, it isn’t dangerous to make the statement that we are believers. But for multiple centuries in the so-called Christian nations, it has been dangerous to be something else. Claiming a worldview other than Christianity has been deadly to Jews, Muslims, and native peoples over time who have gotten in the way of western expansion and colonial desires.

But now, it seems to me, there is a conflict happening over the very nature of the Christian faith. It is as deeply divided as our political mess, and often falls along similar fault lines. When this letter tells us to “Honor the Emperor” – does it mean to unflinchingly go along with those in power because it helps Christians continue to feel powerful, or does it mean something else altogether?

My interpretation is this. What is deeply and spiritually important to practicing the Christian faith hasn't changed from biblical times. What has changed is the context in which Christians have engaged the world, and that has tended to change how we have interpreted the Bible for our own power and benefit. Are we Christians who have chosen to align ourselves with the power of a nation or its leaders, or are we Christians who still fundamentally choose God first? This letter isn't telling us to get in line with worldly power at all. In fact, Jesus scoffs at that type of power in turn after turn. So let us look a bit more closely at what it does say in these few verses, and in the rest of this chapter.

. *Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles.* – Good conduct remains the same whether it's with those of your community or outside it. The Gentiles may ridicule you for it – and call you evildoers. Do it anyway. Rid yourselves of all deception, insincerity, envy, and all slander – applies no matter whom you are with.

*For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution.* – I would say this as “for God's sake” don't poke the sleeping bear with a sharp stick. Human institutions – governments, schools, churches exist to create order, teach what the culture deems important, and to maybe even “tame” spirituality to fit into a container they can hold. Those institutions have their place, and are recognized as authorities. Sometimes we do our best to change those – not by fighting them – but by making them better through the ways God directs us.

*As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.* – As servants of God, live free. There's a freedom of mind that cannot be taken away by anyone – not a master, not a government official, not even a torturer. Bob Marley sings, “Free

yourselves from mental slavery. No one else can free your mind.” This letter bears out the same message. Those who really heard Jesus and his message of love live in freedom. No one else can tell them who they are.

Then in a very particular order, this letter instructs us to:

*Honor everyone.*

*Love the family of believers.*

*Fear God.*

*Honor the emperor.*

This was written well before Christians had any power or influence whatsoever. If you can imagine reading this through the eyes of slaves and a fringe religious culture rather than the eyes of masters and important people, you will see how it is filled with the promise of emancipation. You are the rejected stone that builds the spiritual house. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. SO THAT you can proclaim the spiritual miracle that leads us from the deepest darkness into God’s own marvelous light.

Therefore, honor absolutely everyone. That would sound and breathe like the fresh air of freedom to the ones who never had the chance to live with honor – slaves, women, children, aliens, strangers. They mattered to the Christian community. So, the next step was to show love to everyone who found themselves in this band of followers. Support each other, care for each other, none rank above, none are considered unimportant. Fear God alone, and nothing else. That allowed them to live for righteousness sake, and not be as afraid of abuse or punishment. Honor

the Emperor is just another way of saying, in the end, love your enemy too. If you are going to honor everyone, that everyone even includes those who would hate you or run the world according to how it benefits them. It's the boldest of all the Christian moves – love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you.

When you get a taste for the spiritual milk, the longing to know this God of love that is passionately in love with all of creation, and all of humankind – it will change you. It may not change the government, likely it won't. It may not change those who want their church aligned with power and prestige, likely some churches will remain locked into that pattern of desiring control over others. But YOU will be different. YOU will be set free. YOU will be less afraid, and become more loving and kind. The conduct of control will fall out of your repertoire – no more dealing out of falsehood and favoritism. Your conduct will be honorable and count all people as the beloved in God's eyes.

Yes, this Christian message has been warped over time. This chapter is 1st Peter is undeniably one of the ones used in defense of horrible governments and the cruelty of slavery. You can easily see how that is so. But the message here is for endurance during times of persecution and suffering. It is the bold claim that the freedom of Christianity is not diminished by the state execution of its boldest spiritual spokesperson. Indeed, Jesus demonstrated the expansiveness of vulnerability as to die at the hands of such power to show us God's willingness to suffer on behalf of this beloved creation – leading the way to love.

The Bible carries within it texts that have been used as clobber passages. Telling slaves to accept the authority – even of harsh masters – is abhorrent to us now, or should be. But in this context, it is about freeing one's mind for knowing deep within that as a slave, I serve God first and I am God's beloved. Who else was telling slaves that? Honoring the Emperor, the governor, a

powerful enemy, anyone who holds public authority doesn't mean blindly accepting their cruelty – it means demonstrating a different way of life, the Christian life, the path of genuine life, even at the expense of being ridiculed or punished for it. Honor everyone - first. Love the community of believers – first. Fear God – first. This is the stance of the Christian – to live life within governments, but to live absolutely free of their tyranny and control. We are ruled by a higher authority, so we are free to live as ourselves within states and nations both good and bad. Our goal is always to live in love first. May it be so as we choose our Christian path. Amen.