

Scripture and Sermon for January 15, 2017

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel,
in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God."

And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength— he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

John 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking

for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Let us pray...Amen.

Last week, I attended the bible study group I use to help in my sermon preparation. We discussed this John passage, where Jesus renames Simon, son of John, as Peter.

Simon means 'hearer', which isn't too bad a meaning for a future disciple or apostle. But Peter, or, in Aramaic, Cephas, means rock. And in our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells Simon that he will now be called Cephas, the rock upon which the church will be founded.

But two of our bible study members speak Greek, Hebrew, and a little Aramaic. I am not one of them. But I *do* get to benefit from studying with the two that do!

In this case, it was pointed out that the Aramaic word *Cephas* is, in technical terms, a diminutive version of the word rock, more like a pebble. Cephas isn't some massive block of bedrock, it is a stone, or pebble.

Jesus set his church upon the pebble of Peter's character.

Peter wasn't perfect, but Peter was faithful. Peter wasn't brilliant, but he was passionate in his faith and in his following of Jesus.

Prone to blurting things out, Peter lived his faith life with little inhibition. Peter is both a model follower, and a symbol of our own faith journeys as well.

After feeding the 5000, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Several hours later in the night, the disciples encountered a storm. Jesus appeared to them, walking on the water. This terrified the disciples who think they are seeing a ghost. Jesus told them "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." So Jesus invited Peter to come. Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter took his eyes off Jesus and saw the wind and waves, he began to sink. Peter cried out to the Lord and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter. As they climbed into the boat together, the storm ceased. Then the disciples worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Peter doesn't begin to sink until he starts looking around at the wind and the waves. Taking our eyes off Jesus, and focusing on the difficult circumstances will cause us to get under our problems. But when we cry out to Jesus, he catches us by the hand and raises us above the seemingly impossible surroundings.

Peter starts out with good intentions, but his faith falters. This does not, however, end up in failure. Peter, even in his fear, cries out to the Lord, the only one who can help him.

On the mountaintop, with Jesus and James and John, Peter sees Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. When Jesus returns to the group, Peter blurts out how great it would be if Jesus could reside on the mountain forever, that the disciples should build a booth for Jesus where he could live.

Peter doesn't see the big picture, only the immediate moment, which he hopes to preserve forever.

Jesus rebukes Peter, reminding him that the path for the Christ will be an arrest, torture, and crucifixion.

At the Last Supper, Peter is horrified to hear that one of the disciples will betray Jesus, and that he, himself, will deny Jesus 3 times before the rooster crows. 'Surely not I, Lord!' is his reply.

Many of us remember the scene where Jesus asks Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' And three times, with increasing exasperation, Peter responds, yes, you know that I love you, and Jesus tells him, feed my sheep, tend my lambs.

A pebble indeed: we are a lot like Peter. We may be willing to take a faith risk, but we lose our nerve. We sink as soon as we take our eyes off of Jesus. We don't want to face the horrible treatment Jesus receives at the hands of his Roman captors, we don't want to see the crucified savior on a cross. We forget that those things were necessary in order for Jesus to triumph over death, to win our freedom from sin, and to provide for us eternal life.

When push comes to shove, many abandon faith, failing to stand up for Jesus. Many deny him and his role in their lives publicly, even as they remain steadfast in private.

But even with our faults and failures, Jesus wants us to know that if we love him, we will feed his sheep, tend his lambs. He trusts us to do that, just like he trusted Peter, Cephas, to serve as the foundation of his church.

When modern buildings, from modest homes to endless skyscrapers are built, they aren't built directly on solid rock. They are built on foundations that are poured on top of crushed stone, gravel, pebbles. The most secure foundations, and ones that meet building code, are built on the right amount of gravel. We are the gravel upon which Jesus places his

foundation for the church. Along with that first stone, that first rock, that first pebble, Peter.

Peter wasn't some massive, unmoving, unshakable boulder, he was a pebble that worked best with other pebbles. Imperfect, but able to shift with others in order to provide a solid foundation.

You and I are pebbles too. You can look at these stories of Peter, and perhaps find hints of yourself in them. You can see how you, too, are an imperfect pebble, meant to work with other pebbles in securing the foundation of the church for Jesus.

We don't see the big picture. We want things to stay the same when they seem really good. We sink when we take our eyes off of Jesus during the storms of our lives, but when we reach out for Jesus, he is there to grab us by the hand. We love Jesus very much, but in our failures, we deny him publicly, even if we hold him close to our hearts in private. Surely not I Lord...

Jesus calls us, challenges us, convicts us, to show our love for him by feeding his lambs, tending his sheep. By loving our neighbor as he has loved us, by loving others as we love ourselves.

Peter wasn't embarrassed by his outbursts, or by the rebukes he received at the hand of his Lord and Savior, Jesus. Neither should we be embarrassed when we stumble on our faith journey. As long as we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and get back to the task of feeding the sheep and lambs that Jesus loves, we'll be just fine.

Simon, the 'hearer', was renamed Cephas, Peter, rock, or pebble. His role as a disciple, as an apostle is legendary. And your role as a follower, or my role as a follower of Jesus is just as important. Because we are all pebbles, working together to form the secure foundation upon which the church will stand. Gravel is not sinking sand, it is both solid and somewhat flexible, able to support great weight without cracking or breaking when things shift.

You'd think that by now, we wouldn't be talking about the foundation of the church any more, that by now, we'd be constructing the highest levels of the most sophisticated church anyone can imagine.

But it really does come down to earth, down to the foundation, down to the individual pebbles that support the foundation, down to you, and me. As God does new things, we're here. As the world challenges the faithful to be relevant, we're here. As the need for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, consoling those who mourn grows, we're here, in all our blustery, impulsive, unpredictable, imperfect ways, we are Cephas, too. Amen.