

You are Living Stones!

Meditation on 1 Peter 2:2-10

May 14, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like 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. ⁶For 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.' ⁷To 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', ⁸and '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. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Isabella Baumfree was born in Ulster County, New York, around 1797, 21 years after Thomas Jefferson presented a document to the Continental Congress that declared our independence from England, saying, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" Isabella's actual birth date is unknown because she was born into slavery. Colonel Hardenbergh owned her family and the house in which

Isabella worked in Esopus, a Dutch-speaking community, 95 miles north of New York City.

Isabella was one of 12 children; 10 of whom were sold when they were very young. Only Isabella or “Belle,” as she was called, and her brother remained with their parents when the colonel died, and then his son, in 1806, and all of the Baumfrees were separated; 9-year-old “Belle” was sold at auction with a flock of sheep for \$100. Her new owner was a harsh man named John Neely. She was sold 2 more times in the next 2 years until she became the property of John Dumont at West Park, near Kingston, NY. She began to learn English for the first time. Around 1815, Belle fell in love with a slave named Robert from a neighboring farm. They had a daughter, but Robert’s owner forbade their relationship. Robert and Belle never saw each other again. Dumont, in 1817, forced Belle to marry an older slave named Thomas, and they had 3 children.

New York emancipated its slaves on July 4, 1827. But Belle left Dumont with her infant daughter, Sophia, in 1826 when he reneged on a promise to free her. She could not bring her other daughter and 5-year-old son, Peter, with her because they were not legally freed in the emancipation order until they had served into their 20s. She said, “I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right.” A kindly Christian couple took her and her baby into their New Paltz home, paying her for her services until the state’s emancipation law took effect. Shortly afterward, Belle learned her former owner had sold her son Peter illegally to an Alabama man. She fought Dumont in court and in 1828 became the first black woman to

go to court against a white man--and win the case.

She became a devout Christian while living with the Christian couple. Growing in courage--and in spirit and truth--she moved with her children to New York City in 1829 and found work as a housekeeper. But she would have more suffering when her son disappeared after taking a job on a whaling ship. She never saw him again.

While some people's faith might falter with the grief Belle was made to bear, her faith grew stronger. She became a Methodist in 1843, experiencing another spiritual awakening or rebirth. She took on a new identity. Her new name? *Sojourner Truth*. "The Spirit calls me," she told her friends, "and I must go." She left to travel and preach of her hope in Jesus Christ and the goodness of God and work toward a more fair and just society--with the abolishment of slavery and equal human rights for all, including women.

On this day when we honor and remember our mothers and the mothers of our faith, it is fitting to remember Isabella Baumfree, who, though she endured great suffering, persevered and sought to follow Christ. She felt called to preach the gospel and work to set the oppressed free, despite her having the lowest status of any person in American society in the 19th century--a freed slave, a black woman in an age when few women spoke in the public square and no women--black or white-- possessed the right to vote.

Certainly, there are countless women we could hold up as examples of strong Christians who overcame adversity to become a bold witness for the Lord. But Isabella's story and her taking on a new identity after

coming to know Jesus reveals a sophisticated understanding of the Scripture, in particular 1 Peter, our epistle reading today. This is remarkable considering she was an uneducated, illiterate woman, who spoke English as a Second Language.

Peter writes his first letter to *exiles* in Asia Minor-- Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. But this letter is for all Christians, stirring hope amidst trials and suffering. Though we don't know exactly the situation 1st Century Christians face, Peter is saying, essentially, no matter where they live, even if it is their place of birth, now, because of their faith in Jesus Christ, (1:19) they are citizens of a heavenly kingdom and only *sojourners* in a pagan culture that is the Roman Empire.

God has given us, 1 Peter 1:3 says, "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," an "inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you!" (1:4) And because of this living hope, we can "rejoice" for suffering and persecution have a godly purpose--our spiritual growth and maturity.

The main message of 1 Peter is this--that being a Christian means that we are changed AND our relationships with God and human beings are transformed. All of this is a gift from the Lord for those who desire to be changed and to "love one another deeply from the heart," as Peter says in 1:22.

Our relationships with God and one another are fed by God's Word and prayer. Peter exhorts us in 2:2 to be "newborn infants," who are completely reliant on their mothers for nourishment. "Long for the pure, spiritual milk," he says, meaning God's Word. He quotes Psalm 34:8-- "*if* indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." This "tasting" is

an enjoyment and intimate experience of God, being in the divine presence and not just an intellectual knowledge of Scripture.

Peter draws from the prophet Isaiah with the language of a “living stone,” for Jesus Christ. “Come to him, a living stone,” he says, “though rejected by (human beings) yet chosen and precious in God’s sight!” He continues to quote Scripture in 2:6, with, “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

In our spiritual rebirth, we have become more like him--and less like our former selves, though we still sin and must seek to be holy in our conduct. We, like the cornerstone of our faith, are also “living stones” -- -sometimes rejected by human beings when we go against the culture in which we live yet chosen by God and precious to Him. Holiness is a gift from the God who is holy, the result of obedience to God’s Word AND following in Christ’s loving example. “Do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance,” he says. And, in 2:1, “Rid yourselves of all malice...deceit, insincerity, jealousy, and slander or ‘backbiting,’” as some translations say.

The goal is not simply our personal holiness, but that we become united with one another in Christ, *built by God* into a “spiritual house.” This is something we must allow the Lord to do; God will not do it without our cooperation and participation. In this day and age, when kindness in the public square is so rare, we can take comfort in the promise of 2:5 that God will make us into a “holy priesthood.” We are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” called for a purpose, as Sojourner Truth well understood, “To proclaim the mighty acts of him

who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.”

Sojourner Truth, who heard and heeded God’s call, persevering through suffering, became one of the most influential African American women of the 19th century. Sojourner’s image has been carved, painted, sketched, made into rag dolls, and engraved on a stamp. In 2009, a bust of Sojourner Truth was unveiled at the U.S. Capitol. The U.S. Treasury Dept. plans to feature Sojourner on the back of a \$10 bill.

In her lifetime, she joined with abolitionist groups, worked for women’s rights, religious tolerance, prison reform, and pacifism. In 1843, she bought her first home in Florence, Mass., for \$300 , and spoke at the first National Women’s Rights Convention. She went on numerous lecture tours, often speaking to hostile crowds. She dictated her life story in 1850 and it was published as a book called, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. In May 1851, she attended the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention where she delivered her famous extemporaneous speech, later known as “Ain’t I a Woman.”

She met Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and helped recruit black troops for the Union Army. She met President Ulysses S. Grant and tried unsuccessfully for 7 years to secure land grants for former slaves. She rode streetcars in Washington, D.C. in 1865 to help force desegregation. In 1872, she tried to vote in the presidential election, but was turned away at the polling place. She had found support in high places, but never saw the just and equal society of which she dreamed--at least, not before she went home to be with the Lord in 1883.

So, Church, how are you doing with God's call on your life? Are you, like newborns, longing for the pure spiritual milk from the living stone, the cornerstone, rejected by human beings, but chosen and precious to God? Are you struggling through a dark time, finding it hard to see God's marvelous light? Remember: You aren't who you used to be! You don't have to fall into the same old negative thinking and behaviors. You have a new identity! Don't fret if the world rejects you. You are chosen and precious to God! You are a holy priesthood! You are living stones!

Let us pray. Holy One, thank you for the gift of Your Son, the Cornerstone of our faith and the Living Stone, who, though rejected by human beings, is chosen and precious in your sight. Thank you for calling us to follow in Christ's footsteps--to love as he loved-- and for remaking us into his image--into living stones, sometimes rejected by human beings, but chosen and always precious to you! Thank you for the great women of faith who have come before us, the mothers who have suffered, yet persevered in their trust for you. Thank you for Sojourner Truth, whom you used to be a bold witness for the gospel and to make our country a more just and fair place. We thank you for your promise to make us into a holy priesthood and to use us for your good purposes. Please bless all the women and girls of our faith community with courage, strength, wisdom, peace and joy as we seek to be transformed by you and to do all that you have ordained for us to do--for you! In your Precious Son's name we pray. Amen.