

“God’s Own People”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 10, 2020

1 Peter 2: 2-10

This has been a hard week for our city and our country. There were two police-involved shootings within eight hours in the city of Indianapolis, with both resulting in the tragic loss of life. This came on the heels of increased national attention of the killing of a young black man by two armed white men in Georgia, an incident that happened in February but only now has resulted in arrests. Anger, grief, and frustration are very prevalent in our collective lives right now – not only with the health crisis we are living through, but also the racial tension that seems forever embedded in our nation’s DNA. These incidents in our city come only a month after IMPD Officer Breann Leath was shot and killed in the line of duty. Our community yearns for justice, peace, and understanding as we seek to build one another up, not tear each other down.

As I was writing my sermon on Friday morning, the Labor Department announced the unemployment numbers for the month of April. 20.5 million jobs were lost last month – an unprecedented number, never before seen in our nation’s history. An unemployment rate which is 14.7% - in February, the unemployment rate was 3.5%. And that number for April is under-estimating the real situation. With so many under stay-at-home orders, people have not been able to actively seek a new job.

As a student of history, I remember reading about the Great Depression – the bread lines, unemployment rates of 25%, and so on. I remember sitting and listening to my grandmothers and great aunts talk about living through the 1930s – the rationing of food, making clothes last much longer through mending, learning to be grateful for what they had and not wanting for more. Many of us have seen those values instilled in our parents’ generation, as they refuse to throw things away until it’s absolutely necessary. Never in my lifetime would I have thought that I would live through a time that came close to what people two generations before me had lived through.

But that is what we are experiencing now – an economic situation that rivals the Great Depression. I heard the president of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis, Neel Kashkari, interviewed last week. He indicated that economists and policy makers have learned from our country’s past and are making decisions now that will not lead us into another Great Depression. But he also noted that it will not be a quick turnaround – it will take a long time for us to recover from what we are going through.

Which is why it is so difficult right now for our elected and public health officials to know what to do. There is the economic hardship which many are going through – we have seen that in our congregation, and we have seen it in

our community through the increased demand at The Storehouse Food Pantry. People need to get back to work – either jobs where they’ve been furloughed, or seeking new employment – so they can feed, clothe, and house their families.

But there is the very real risk that by loosening these restrictions we have lived under for the last two months, we will see more people getting infected, more people being admitted to the hospital, and our health care system getting stretched beyond its capacity. It’s a tightrope walk with the greatest of consequences. It’s another reminder of how we are walking through uncharted territory, to be sure.

These are not easy times. There is great uncertainty. As people of faith, many of us are struggling to know where God is amid this chaos. We yearn for life in the face of death. We seek hope in the midst of isolation and hopelessness.

I find great comfort in the fact that we are living through these trying times in the season after Easter. For just as we are searching for comfort and strength amid this present uncertainty, the early church was seeking reassurance and peace that God was with them, even in the midst of challenges and chaos.

For example, the writer of 1 Peter was addressing a church spread throughout Asia Minor, but in a time when Christianity was still very much a minority religion. It was particularly difficult for Gentile converts to the faith, who were often persecuted by the predominant Roman culture and customs. This is a pastoral letter written directly to the faithful – “the exiles of the Dispersion,” as we read at the beginning of chapter one – and as such, it is meant to remind these disciples of Christ that now and forever, “you are God’s people.”

As Jerry Sumney says: *Today’s reading takes us to the theological center of 1 Peter; it gives the church an identity designed to sustain it in the midst of suffering. Like many other New Testament texts, this one must help its recipients understand persecution. It must convince them that it is not an indication that they have chosen the wrong god. Through the whole of 1 Peter, the author assures those suffering persecution that God loves them and that they have made the right choice. He acknowledges that they are now “aliens and exiles” in their own cities (1 Peter 2:11, 1:1) because of their faith, but assures them of blessings from God that outweigh and outlast the suffering. Since that is the case, they must remain faithful . . .* (Jerry Sumney, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 262).

This passage heavily weaves Old Testament imagery in with the hope we have in Jesus Christ, reaffirming that Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight” – that is taken from both Isaiah and the Psalms (Isa. 28:16; 8:14; Psalms 118:22). It’s as if the writer is reminding the church that while so much may be crumbling around you, the cornerstone

which God provides offers a foundation upon which to build as living stones of disciples. Indeed, as we read, “Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (2:6).

And the writer concludes with words that echo both the Old Testament prophets and the writer of Hebrews, reminding the faithful that God will always be with them. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” That naming and reassurance is not just to be absorbed and kept to boost our self-esteem; it is for a purpose. “You are God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). The community of faith is reassured of God’s presence in their midst, so that they might go out and share this light of hope to a world in desperate need.

But the way for us to weather those storms – to have the sustenance and strength to make it through – depends on our willingness to be consistently nurtured and fed on God’s love and grace. Joy Douglas Strome writes: *A new Christian “knows” at some deep level that “spiritual milk” is what will nurture their life of faith. The analogy is a good one, as we compare the give-and-take that happens between believer and God before a new Christian grabs on to the miracle of the life of faith and begins to grow. To be sustained for the risks and challenges of a long life of faith, we start as a newborn starts, with raw material of Jesus’ teachings, the good milk that is especially designed to meet our most basic needs.*

Basic needs give way to building blocks, living stones that lay a foundation for the challenges sure to follow. A solid foundation gives way to an identity that will not shrivel up at the first sign of trouble. An identity that includes beautiful descriptors like a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people (2:9).

God’s own people live in the real world. The real world is in real peril. Included in our identity as Christians is the call to proclaim something of what we know about God to the world. That is no small call. To counter the stereotype of small Christian living takes the weight of a person who has, according to 1 Peter, been warmly nurtured in the faith, who has the strength of one whose spiritual house rests on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, and whose identity is strong and secure in the arms of a God who serves up spiritual milk like no other (Joy Douglas Strome, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 462-464).

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We could choose to remain isolated, detached, and separate from the real world – whether we were living through a pandemic or not. But as God’s own people, we have been nurtured with the spiritual milk of God’s Word. That forges our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, an identity that calls us to shine light where there is darkness, love where there is hate, and hope where there is hopelessness. It is not a small call, that’s for sure. But whoever said that this calling was to be easy? Or that you had to do it all by yourself?

The church has been forced to rethink what it means to be church during this pandemic – online worship, using social media, shifting our communication models to meet people where they are, serving in ways that are way out of our comfort zone. And you know what? In many ways, we are reaching more people than ever before. What does that say about who we are called to be as Christ's disciples? As God's own people, how will we be changed by this pandemic so that more people might be reached by the light of hope which God provides?

There is a deep divide in our society between races, whether we wish to see it or not. This week, it was thrust into our faces with tragic consequences. We can choose to remain oblivious to it – social distanced from it, as it were. Or we can choose, as God's own people, to embrace the tension and listen with open hearts and minds, strengthened for those conversations from the spiritual milk we have received from God. We can walk alongside community leaders, public safety and elected officials, and seek to build our community up, so that all feel safe. As God's own people, how will we be inspired to build our community on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, so that our world might be called out of darkness and into God's marvelous light?

The level of poverty and economic insecurity that our nation will be facing for months, if not years, is hard to fathom. While there is hope that it will turn around quickly, that seems less and less realistic. The real world is in real peril. How will we respond as a royal priesthood, as a holy nation? Will we allow the chasm between rich and poor to widen? Will we advocate for reliable and just economic policies to strengthen our communities as a whole? Will we see what we have in our possession as God's blessing on us, and how we are called to share those blessings in gratitude each and every day? As God's own people, how will we make evident the kingdom of God, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, visiting the imprisoned, caring for the sick, and welcoming the stranger?

“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” (2:10). May we live every day in response to that gift from God to us, so that we may proclaim God's mighty acts to a world that does have – and will have – such desperate need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.