

SERMON TITLE: “The Gospel is... New Life”

TEXT: 1 Peter 2:1-10

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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We have reached the end of our short January sermon series on the question, “What is the Gospel?”

As I was preparing for the sermon this week, I was struck by how much I *haven't* said in these four sermons! There is so much that can be said about the nature of the gospel and its implications for life, so much that can be said about

This is especially true of last week's sermon on Jesus. Fifteen minutes is not enough time to even scratch the surface of the ways in which Jesus was and is good news!

But hopefully, if this sermon series has done nothing else, it will have at least helped us to think about the gospel as the broad story of God's work in the world throughout history—from creation to new creation.

Hopefully it will have at least provoked some interesting avenues of thought, and provoked some ideas about how we as individuals and as a church can be gospel people.

We have talked about the good news of

- Creation
- Israel/the people of God
- Jesus

Today, we are focusing on the next chapter in the story after Jesus—the story of how the new life offered by Christ makes its way out into the world.

Every once in a while, I like to ask myself impossible hypothetical questions. Sometimes, I ask myself “If I were God” questions. If I were God, how would I do x, y, z?

And so, if I were God...

...and I had made a world full of wonder and beauty, and human image-bearers to steward what I had made

... and these image bearers who had abused their freedom and messed up my creation...

.... and if I had decided upon a rescue plan that involved my coming to earth to walk among them to teach and to heal, to show them how to live

.... and to ultimately take their sin and shame upon myself on the cross as the means by which to begin to bring heaven and earth together again...

What would come next in the story? What would I do if I were God?

1. Maybe I would make a new and improved kind of Ten Commandments. The first version was pretty good, but people weren't really very good at keeping them. Maybe a new set would work, with a few important additions, say, from the Sermon on the Mount or something like that? Kind of like a Ten Commandments 2.0.
2. Maybe I would just write a formal-looking memo that laid things out in a very clear way so that there would be no confusion or ambiguity:

Dear humanity,

Here is what has happened. Here is where and how things have gone wrong. Here is what God has done. Here is what you need to do. You have this amount of time to respond appropriately. I await your response.

Sincerely,
God.

3. Or maybe I would just *force* people to see the truth of who I am and what I had done. No more subtlety or gentle persuasion. Maybe something like a Holy Spirit force field or overpowering spiritual energy that would render people incapable of resisting me any longer—something that would force them to see their errors and to embrace the many ways that I had acted on their behalf.
4. Or, better yet, if I were Jesus, I would just write a book myself! Wouldn't that be a fantastic idea! A book by Jesus! I would write down everything I had said and done and why I had said and done it, and there would be no room for misinterpretation or confusion. I wouldn't rely on others to write down my messages because other people are rather unreliable and they muck up the important bits of the message with all kinds of elements from their own cultures and histories and languages that tend to confuse people who aren't familiar with them.

But Jesus didn't write a book. He didn't do any of the things I just mentioned.

Rather, Jesus formed a community.

Apparently, Jesus figured that a **community** would be a better strategy to move the story forward than a book.

But what kind of community?

I have a file full of quotes and resources from those who are somehow disaffected with the church. Here's one I came across this week from Kathleen Norris:

From the outside, church congregations can look like remarkably contentious places, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other tooth and nail. That is reason many people give for avoiding them.

Here's another one, from Frederick Buechner:

Our stories are at best a parody of his [Jesus'] story, and if, as Paul says, we are the fragrance of Christ, the it is like the fragrance of the sea from ten miles inland when the wind is blowing in the right direction, like the fragrance of a rose from the other side of the street with all the world in between.

For many people in our culture, the church is the *problem*, not part of the *solution* to what is wrong with our world!

Most people wouldn't put it quite that strongly, but I suspect that statements like these aren't much of a surprise to you. I suspect that you've heard similar sentiments from friends, neighbours, family, co-workers, etc.

I know I've heard many of them. Almost everyone has some kind of a horror story about their last church or the church of their childhood or their parents' church or even their *current* church.

Sometimes these critiques are justified; very often they're not. The church is easy to criticize, especially if you haven't taken the time to learn about or participate in it.

But all of us are familiar with expressions of church that seem *light years* from what it could/should be.

So. Why does the church on the ground look so little like the church as described in the exalted language of our text today?

How is the church good news?

In our text this morning we read these words (1Peter 2:9-10):

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a

people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The people and the situation Peter is describing sounds almost too good to be true!

But just like the churches that you and I are familiar with—and the church we are a part of—the church Peter was writing to wasn't perfect. And it didn't *seem* to match the description Peter was giving them.

The church Peter was writing to was a small group of mostly non-Jewish converts to Christianity who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They were people familiar with persecution and mistreatment.

They were struggling to figure out what it meant to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, following Jesus as Lord in a world where other “lords” seemed much more obvious and powerful.

And they were still learning. 1 Peter was probably written about three decades after Jesus' death and resurrection.

They were babies (that's actually how Peter describes them earlier in chapter 2). They were still figuring out what it meant to say and to live out the truth that a crucified Jewish carpenter was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I'm sure that if some Roman official had heard Peter's list as a description of the church he would have laughed out loud!

Chosen? Holy? *Royal*?! God's “special possession”? What a joke! They're just a tiny little marginalized Jewish cult struggling for survival!

In both cases—the church Peter is writing to and the church of today—there is a gap between what we understand the church to be theologically and what the church looks like on the ground.

NOW AND NOT YET

What our passage this morning shows us is that there are always two realities at work, defining and guiding and shaping our stories as individuals and as churches.

Now and not yet.

The first reality is the reality of churches where ordinary human beings with all of their weaknesses and frailties come together, where people hurt one another, where there are conflicts and confusion, where there is apathy and misdirection.

Rather than being places of new life, churches can be places of judgment, confusion, exclusion, and even pain.

The first reality is of a church that always falls short of the ideal.

But there is another reality at work and this is the reality of what God intends, what God sees in us, and what God is doing to bring this about.

This is the reality of new life and our participations in it.

Right from the beginning, when God said “let there be... animals, light, vegetation, human beings... LIFE”—God has always been a God of life.

We don’t see this new life in its fullness here and now—but we see it in flashes. We see shafts of light through the windows (just like in the image on the wall).

We see goodness and hope and peace emerging like that plant in the midst of all the chaos.

Sometimes the light and the life is harder to detect than others, but it’s still there, still working, still chipping away at the darkness, in every human act of kindness and compassion, every word of hope and forgiveness, every witness to the gospel (in word and deed), every step taken toward addressing injustice and inequality, every demonstration of love, every decision for peace instead of violence.

It is a reality that we don’t see in its entirety yet, but it’s a reality that is guaranteed because of what Jesus has accomplished on our behalf.

The church is to be one of the primary vehicles through which this new life makes its way into a world that still clings to darkness and death.

We’ve already talked about the exalted language Peter uses to describe the church (“chosen people,” “royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” “God’s special possession”).

He uses another term, as well: “living stones.”

It’s a strange metaphor. Stones aren’t living, after all.

But for many of us, few things seem more lifeless than stones. We even describe people whose personality and behaviour are hard and cold as “like a stone.”

But it’s interesting to consider how stones function in Scripture.

Stones are often set up as altars or memorials to commemorate God's activity or some unique experience of his presence (Joshua 4:19-24).

Stones are used to mark out boundaries in Israel's early days in the new land of Canaan as the land is being divided.

The law comes to the nation of Israel on **stone** tablets at Mt. Sinai.

Jesus is described as the **cornerstone** that brings life to those who accept and follow him, and a stumbling block to those who reject him.

Stones often symbolize the solidity and strength of God—they point to something that can anchor our lives and our memories of the ways in which God has always been at work to bring life to us and to the world.

And now Peter uses the language of “living stones” to describe both Jesus and the church that is being built to represent him to the world.

The churches Peter wrote this letter to likely did not seem very solid or strong. Quite possibly, they even occasionally felt fragile and confused.

But God saw things differently—God sees *his* church differently. God sees a spiritual house full of living stones.

It's an interesting metaphor ...“Living stones”: something hard and unyielding is used to convey a picture of new life.

Kind of like this wall hanging from Ten Thousand Villages. Something hard and unyielding (in this case, metal from oil drums) is used to fashion an image of life.

Living stones... It is a good metaphor for how God works.

The church is *God's* idea. And the church is a *good* idea. The church is one of the means by which new life begins to take over the old.

I want to close with words from 1 Corinthians 1:27-28:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

For some, the church might seem like a foolish, weak institution that *has* never and *can* never live up to its ideals.

And they would be right.

And they would be wrong:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

May we as a church continue to live *into* the light—into the **new life** that God is bringing to us and to the world.

May we continue to allow God's strength to be shown in our weakness.

May we continue to be, like living stones, be built into a spiritual house, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Amen.

