

“Safe on the Solid Rock I Stand”

When my sister and I were little, we were in awe of a family with seven children, most of them older than us, four of them rowdy boys. The one child near our age was a little girl, Mary. However, everyone called her Itsy. She was tiny, even though she was right between my sister Anita and me in age. One day, I asked her older sister, Ruthie, “Do you call her Itsy because she is little, like Itsy Bitsy?” Ruthie rolled her eyes and said, “No, Charlie made that nickname up because she acts so sorry for herself sometimes. It’s spelled ITTSC, as in “I’ll Take The Smallest Cookie.” Of course, with those grabby boys around, there is no chance she’d ever get anything else!”

Remember that last week we were considering the idea of sacrifice? Some people seem to think that sacrifice is ostentatiously giving up whatever you think you might like. In fact, sacrifice means making something sacred, and we do that by seeking to do the will of God, not our own. Isaiah, that awesome prophet, tells the Israelites, “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.” That means that those who pursue righteousness acknowledge their origins in the will of God.

Those who seek to know God will live lives that express gratitude in everything, as psalm 138 indicates—thanks with their whole hearts. It is the intention to make everything sacred that increases one’s strength. God cares for the lowly, as Jesus indicates time and again, and keeps God’s beloved safe from trouble. God gives us everything, and wants all of us in return. If we give our entire selves (not just body, but also mind and spirit) to God, as the apostle Paul urges us to do, we will be transformed, our minds will be renewed, and we will discern the will of God, whom the Hebrews called “I AM.”

In a world surrounded by people who worshiped idols that were violent or unpredictable or entirely sensual, the God of the Hebrews was a great mystery, not just to strangers, but to the Hebrews themselves. A God who refused to define Godself was awe-inspiring, even overwhelming. As King David said, “All your waves and billows have gone over me.” The God who told Moses “I AM” as he instructed his servant about the life in the promised land seemed to have stopped speaking to the Hebrews. By the time Jesus came, there were no recorded visitations from God in the form of a cloud or a pillar. God was seen as very far off and awesome. Some said that the gods and goddesses of nearby nations were more appealing, if less mysterious.

So, when Jesus came, and was so clearly one of them, his followers rejoiced to have living proof of the glory of God among them. In today’s Gospel, Peter was able, based upon his own experience, to say that Jesus was the Anointed One for whom the Hebrew people had been waiting. Peter’s statement of Truth led Jesus to grant him the privilege of being the rock, the foundations stone of the believing community.

What about today, though? Who do you say that Jesus is? Some people say that we are in the same situation as the Hebrews before Jesus came—it is a long time since God has walked among us. Yet

in the Eucharist, our blessing, we know that Jesus is here among us, present in body and blood, and that Jesus also left us with God's Holy Spirit to dwell with us to strengthen us, and to inspire us with every breath we take.

Last Sunday, we remembered St. Teresa's words that we are the hands, feet, and eyes of Jesus on the earth. Who do you say, with your behavior, with your appearance and with your speech, that Jesus is? YOU are Jesus to many, the only Gospel that some people will ever read. In making all of life sacred, dedicated to Jesus Christ, we are not all asked to make the same offering. Paul reminds us that our gifts differ, according to the grace given us. It is a great mercy, not only to me but to worshipers who may attend a service at which I preside, that I do not try to engage in liturgical dance. A great teacher of Bible studies may not be the person to prophesy. The leader of a congregation may not be the one to minister. Yet each gift has its place in making whole and alive the functioning of the Body of Christ.

Peter became the leader of the Body of Christ because the rock from which his faith sprang, imperfect though it was, was the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of the Son of God. He was certainly not an expected type of leader—unpredictable, emotional, given to outbursts—yet this one outburst becomes an event of divine revelation that shows forth I AM as both human and divine.

Your efforts to make life sacred will meet a world in need of the love of Jesus Christ that you share. As the church, we stand on the rock of a faith like Peter's—perhaps not perfect, but strong and ready to witness. For too long, sacrifice has been portrayed as a kind of false martyrdom, of a heavy sigh as one takes the smallest cookie. It is time to step up to the challenges of Jesus Christ—to love with our whole hearts, our souls, our minds—with every part of us--and to take that love into all the world, a world that has never needed it more. We will not be confined by the pandemic forever, and the world is waiting.

AMEN.