

Tuesday, September 19, 2017 - Day 261 – Jeremiah 48-49, Psalm 64, I Peter 2

The author of 1 Peter shares a complex and contradictory message, as well as powerful images in this second chapter. Writing near the end of the first century to very likely a group of marginalized and demoralized believers waiting for the second coming of Christ, he invokes the metaphor of a “living stone,” which at first reading may seem like an oxymoron. How can an inanimate object like a stone be alive, we may ask? When it may be gathered with other stones and built into a spiritual house. When despite being rejected, it may be utilized as a corner stone and as a stumbling block, as the prophet Isaiah describes.

This beloved and fragile first century community is exhorted to become that “spiritual house” by turning from sinful desires and by seeking God with the urgency and simplicity of newborn infants seeking mother’s milk. They are told, “. . .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 marvelous light.” Among the most beautiful, encouraging words in the epistles of the New Testament, how heartening this message must have been to this community for whom it was written.

What is problematic are the instructions which follow to “accept the authority of every human institution,” and for “slaves [to] accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” Using the example of Jesus as the Suffering Servant from the Isaiah text, the author writes that God approves of endurance in suffering and injustice. Perhaps they all believed that their suffering would be short lived because the end times were not far off, but unfortunately, this text has been utilized as a biblical imperative throughout the centuries by those who sought to legitimize the role of human institutions such as governments in perpetrating slavery and other forms of inhumanity. Surely, we do not accept or believe that this is what our loving God intends.

This passage is a critical example of why it is important to approach the biblical texts prayerfully, appreciatively, and critically, asking questions about authorship and context. At the same time, we look to the overarching messages found in the entire biblical canon, the whole story of the people of God. We look to Jesus in the Gospels, to the epistles of Paul and others, as well as to the Hebrew Scriptures where we find the words of the Prophet Amos, “let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

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