

If These Rocks Could Speak
2 Peter 1:3-11
First Baptist Church, January 22, 2023

Legacy:

Have you ever wanted to attend your own funeral?

I do. I guess I'm just curious. When people gather at my funeral, what parts of my life stand out? What experiences are highlighted; what stories do people share? What about my character gets spoken about? What about my faults and failings? Will the things that I find important or valuable be the same things that are emphasized?

I don't know! But I wish I could know. . .

The oldest object that I have knowingly looked at was an altar stone in the city of Byblos, Lebanon. There's been a lot of history made in Byblos. They claim to be the birthplace of the alphabet, over 6,000 years ago. People have been living in Byblos for a very long time!

And tucked away in the middle of the modern, shops and homes, mosques and churches, many ancient ruins, and even an amphitheater, stands a small, active church. It even has a gift shop in it for tourists to buy icons and knick knacks, just like every other shop seems to. But when we stopped to talk to the woman in the sanctuary, she asked us if we wanted to see something really cool.

Of course, we said yes!

She trooped us all down a set of stairs into the basement. And then through a lot of old stuff, through to a low crawl space. The floor here was dirt. The beams of the floor above was only a few inches above my head, and I was crawling.

Then, in the dim light of a single lamp, there is a very simple shrine centered on an ancient altar stone. The stone dates back to the second century.

The stone itself not that impressive. It's a block. But the stories that have happened around it! The lives lived, the priorities, the decisions, the consequences. The actions, dedication, and faithfulness of generations, the making that place what it is. This is what makes that stone impressive.

This astounded me. This simple block of stone, over which an active church is built, gives mute testimony to the astounding fact that people have been worshipping the living saviour, the same Jesus that I worship, for 2,000 years, on that very spot.

I am not 2000 years old. And yet, in one way, I am the same. My body is like that rock – it takes up space, and marks the place where I am being. But who I am, my being? I am the culmination of the events, ideas, and decisions of my life.

Many sermons focus on an application that asks us to do something. We like these, because it gives us a tangible sense of accomplishment, or to grasp onto, or to feel like we've arrived at the next step.

This is not wrong! It is good to grow in our faith in practical, physical ways.

Yet scripture is more vocal about becoming. It is about a state of being – how we move around in this creation is determined by what we allow to shape us as creatures.

I have become. I am the collection of events, experiences, relationships, large and small, that have all shaped my being.

I am profoundly grateful for the many blessings in my life.

From a hand extended to me in greeting at new student orientation, I learned the lesson of true hospitality, and a picture of life-long friendship.

From a pastor and a group of like-minded young adults, I learned the value of worship.

From InterVarsity, I learned how to lead, speak, and pray.

From my family, I learned the depth of God's love for me, and the joy of discovering the mundane through the eyes of wonder in a child, and learned how God delights in our discovery of his creation.

It hasn't all been roses, though. Many of my deepest, treasured values have come from moments of tragedy or hardness. These were the awful things, the things that I wouldn't wish on anyone, and even then, so much less suffering than many have had to endure. It has only been through the gift of time and friends to process these with Jesus that they have become redeemed for me, so that I can be grateful, even for them. I realize here that it is good to tread lightly – I do not want to be misunderstood, that suffering is somehow good. I merely want to recognize that God can be found in the middle of it.

My first close brush with death was a motorcycle crash that took my friend James. From this I learned the inconvenience of everything about the great enemy of Christians, death. I learned the capricious nature of life, and the falseness of control.

Being fired from my company during downsizing taught me about integrity in my life, and humility – how I handle myself during crisis and conflict reflects what I actually believe about Jesus.

An ectopic pregnancy taught me about the grace of God – how inconceivably greater it is than I can ever comprehend – and how grace allows us to make decisions in dilemmas, unwinnable situations, and still know that God is with us.

Even COVID. COVID taught me about how wide and deep and long and high is the love of God – as shown through his church. When my mom was hospitalized, the church mobilized in prayer. When we went online I reconnected with people we hadn't been able to connect with for a long time. I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this family of God was mine, and I am theirs. Church, I know, is so much more than a program on a Sunday morning. It is nothing less than the deep and cherished fact of belonging. To God and to each other.

I am the man that I am today because of the sum of these experiences. The values and the characteristics that I cherish most I have learned through these profound lessons; things like humility and grace, faithfulness and companionship, love and hope.

When we started this sermon series on the theme of what are you thankful for, and what are you excited about, the first part was easy.

What am I thankful for?

The gift of life that God gives us. All of it. Everything that has happened around me and to me. The ups and downs, the joys and sorrows of it all. That everything that I've done and experienced are far less important individually than how God has shaped me through them. They make me who I am today. And so I deliberately look back on the stories of me, and find the careful, forming hands of Creator God, shaping me.

The second part, what am I excited about, that is a little bit more challenging.

Part 2

While it is easy for me to talk about gratitude, excitement is much harder. When I stood in front of a church first in Kenya and then in Zambia, and worshipped and prayed and taught, my bucket list was completed.

I just simply ran out of what I think of as life-defining goals.

And yet I'm not quite ready yet for that funeral!

So, what to be excited about?

Then Bruce preached a sermon with the phrase that I think has the power, the potential, to shape the next season of my life, and the life of our church. Something that can take the pieces of my story, of all our stories, and refit them into a mosaic of the kingdom of God for this place and this time.

Just like my thankfulness for the life that has shaped me, I am honestly most excited about who God is making us to be as his church.

I call it GNOGJFAP.

Or better yet, we've been talking about the church being Good News of Great Joy for All People.

From the first part of today's sermon, the things that we do answer a much deeper, more profound question – the question of being. How do we become? Even in light of all of our experiences?

There are a few thoughts that I have on this, out of our reading of 2 Peter.

First, God has already given us everything we need to know him, and live – that is, grace, faith and peace. In God's glory and goodness, he has provided these things to us.

So, we respond to this gift of faith, grace, and peace, by making every effort to build on it. We deliberately seek out opportunities to collect the characteristics that God finds valuable.

Goodness – so that we reflect God's attitude towards creation and community around us.

Knowledge – so that when we speak about God, we do so justly and accurately.

Self-control and perseverance – so that we can live a life fully free from what Peter calls the corruption of the world caused by evil desires. So that we do not bring dishonour and shame onto God's or the church's reputation by falling back into evil desires, and so associating God's way with the ways of the world.

Godliness – so that we live a life of clear contrast to the goals, priorities and desires of the world around us.

Mutual affection – so that we do it together. This phrase suggests family association and belonging.

Love – because this is the defining characteristic of our God, it must be the foundation, the prime motivation for us, his people.

When we deliberately set out to collect these “ways of being” Peter makes some pretty strong statements:

Peter says we will be prevented from being ineffective and unproductive, which means we will be effective and productive! This really struck me. By growing in these ways of being, we get distracted from the evil desires that corrupt the world, and have our attention fully focused on God! And, most awesomely, the more ineffective and unproductive we get for worldly concerns because of these things, the more effective we become for Jesus!

Next, Peter says that not doing these things makes us forget what God has done. So what that means is that by growing in these ways of being, we will remember our gift of forgiveness and cleansing from our past – our whole story becomes redeemed to God’s glory.

Best of all, we will know Jesus.

And we will participate in the divine nature of the God of gods, King of kings, and sovereign over all. Holy Moses! Or more accurately, holy church!

This puts me in mind of another big rock that I once saw. Very cool for the stories and the history of it all, but also very mundane.

I once visited a church in Crathorne, England. A church has stood on this ground for hundreds of years, but it was most recently rebuilt in the 19th century. The builders used whatever was to hand, namely the old stuff lying around.

So, the lintel stone, that is the rock that holds up the wall above the door, was a six-foot-long gravestone from the 12th century! Other walls and decorations incorporated ancient gravestones, and fragments.

This church is what comes to mind when I read this section of 2 Peter. Lots of rocks, originally used for very different purposes, now built into a living, worshiping church.

All of the events, experiences and ideas of my life make me, me, but they often happened in disconnected, unrelated ways.

All of those experiences are just knowledge gained. It is only when I look back on them through my growth in goodness, knowledge, self-control, godliness, perseverance. . . do I see the ways that these experiences are crafted together for an altogether different goal – the shaping of me into a man of God, for the glory of God. My experiences, in addition to the collection of characteristics that God finds valuable, make something new, and good.

God takes the collection of my life, and makes me good news of great joy for all people. What is true for each of us as individuals is true for us as a church as well. Together, he makes us good news of great joy for all people. It’s a process, and we make every effort to facilitate it, seeing everything, our highs and

lows, through who Jesus is making us to be. We, friends, are becoming. I want to close with the most exciting part, read out of Philippians 1, because I think that it was this same gratitude and excitement about the Philippian Church that prompted Paul to write this:

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Let's close in prayer, praying with Paul:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Benediction:

May you have eyes to see Jesus in your past, a mind to see him with you now, and the joy of becoming his, more, and more, and more.