

God's grace, mercy, and peace be yours in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour! The title for today's sermon is "Righteous Rock" and is from the Old Testament reading, Isaiah 51:1-6. Let us pray... Amen.

Most people do not spend much time looking at or studying rocks, unless they are a geologist, petrologist, mineralogist, rock hound, mine worker, or farmer picking stones out of a field. Most people will admit to having no interest to even look at a rock, unless of course it is sparkling on a lady's finger and attached to an engagement or wedding band. Then everyone wants to see it.

But I am not talking about those kinds of rocks, nor does God Word give them much attention. The Rock God talks about in our text tonight, and through Scripture is greater than any amount of sparkling crystallized carbon, any quantity of gems, or other stones. This Rock is more precious than anything Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined could ever purchase, yet is also more accessible and available to everyone than water is in our neck of the woods.(151)

Now, looking at the Old Testament reading, God's first words are simple: "**Listen to Me**". In fact, in the six verses of today's reading God imperatively tells Israel six times to pay attention to Him, His revealed Word, and His actions. Six times, in different constructs, God tries to bring the reader or hearer's attention back to God.

Yet God, Yahweh, is talking to a certain group of people. "**Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord**". God does not say 'listen to your heart', nor does He instruct you to 'trust your feelings', Yahweh does not even say trust in your own understanding. Chapter 50 concluded with a dire warning against such actions, of people trying to please God with a do-it-yourself kind of spirituality. It does not end well. So God proclaims: "**Listen to Me...**". "**Listen to Me**" because you live in a fallen and corrupt world. The devil, the world, and even your own sinful flesh would have you reject God and His Word to your eternal condemnation and damnation. Your hearts lie, your feelings can be easily manipulated to deceive, and each of you were conceived and born in sin. God's Word is clear; you, we, are all sinners. We cannot save ourselves by our actions, just as the Israelites and ALL of their ancestors could not save themselves.

So, God points those "**who seek the Lord**" to a different kind of righteousness, a righteousness outside of themselves. Moses promised God's covenant people before they entered the Promised Land that if they sought the Lord they would find Him. Solomon encourages seeking Yahweh face through repentance and prayer (2 Chronicles 7:14). Additionally, there are a number of references in the Book of Psalms encouraging God's covenant people to seek His face. (Ps 24:6, 27:8, 105:4)

But seeking God is not like playing 'hide and go seek' because God is not hiding. God has revealed Himself. God told the Israelites where to find Him.

But it's not just those who seek Him, rather "**those who pursue Righteousness**". Now, the term righteousness is usually paired with 'salvation'. In Scripture, the term can refer to two different kinds of Righteousness. When it refers to **God's righteousness**, it is in some way related to His 'saving acts' through Grace. On the other hand, when it refers to **Human righteousness**, it relates either to one's standing in the covenant with God and/or how one treats others ethically. As such, it is God's desire to grant both: Vertical righteousness: imputed by God for the sake of Christ who has won the victory over our enemies, and Horizontal righteousness: our empowered response to God's gifts (in Christ).

Yet, God does not point us to our own righteousness saying do this and that, instead He points us to the Rock. God points us away from ourselves to another. He tells us to Look to the Rock because there is great comfort and strength there. The same "Look!" was told to Abraham when he was told to Look to the stars and count them as that would be the number of his descendants.

But there is a reason God points Israel(, *and us*,)to Abraham: the first Patriarch of the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel is who they are because of God's fulfilled promises to Abraham. Abraham was the A rock in that he was but one and was "**as good as dead**" when by faith Sarah received the power to conceive(*Rom 4:19; Heb 11:11-12*). God chose Abraham and Sarah and blessed them. Then through their offspring all nations were blessed.

But we are not blessed because of Abraham's works of righteousness, instead by faith we share his righteousness. Abraham is the first person in the Bible to be declared righteous in God's sight, and it had nothing to do with Abraham's works, feelings, or actions. Genesis 15:6 says; "**Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.**"(*Genesis 15:6*) Abraham trusted God's Word, and on account of his God given faith was declared righteous by God. Abraham responded by teaching his offspring righteousness and justice (*Gen 18:19*). This response to God's grace shows that faith is living and active, producing deeds of righteousness and love (*Gal 5:6; ApIV 353,384-5*). It also reminds us of where our righteousness in God's eyes comes from: it is never from ourselves.

This call to look back was also a reminder to the nation of Israel because they were where they were because of God's active work in then and for them. They were God's covenant people because He chose them, delivered and saved them, **NOT** the other way around.

God did not call them, or us, to stare ourselves! Quite the opposite, God points us away from ourselves in a very specific direction. The Rock they, and we, are to look to is here implied to be Abraham (51:2). **YET**, throughout Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament, the ROCK is God Himself (*Is 17:10, 26:4, 44:8; Deut 32:4,15,18,30-31; Ps 18:2*). In Deuteronomy 32:18 – Moses pairs "the Rock that gave you birth" with "the God who begot you". Earlier in Isaiah God told the people: "**Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. ...Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.**"(*Is 44:6,8b*)

So, going back to today's text, there is great comfort and reason to look back to Abraham and Sarah. When God called Abraham and his wife Sarah they were decades past their childbearing years. They had no children, no heir, no future. Sarah was 89 years old and Abraham was 99 years old when God promised them a son. God called Abraham and Sarah in their weakness.

At that time there was no proper place for women who were barren. Children were their security in their old age, as they were for their father. A lack of children brought open shame on both the man and the woman. Being childless was a basis for grief, shame, and fear.

Interestingly, all three of Israel's matriarchs, Sarah, Abraham's wife(*Gen 11:30*), Rebekah, Isaac's wife(*Gen 25:21*), and Rachel, the favourite wife of Jacob(later named Israel)(*Gen 29:31*) were all considered barren. This reveals the theology of the cross. "**God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are**"(*1 Cor 1:27-28*). He "**gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist**"(*Romans 4:17*). God's promise to multiply Abraham's offspring extends beyond the Old Testament era to Jesus Christ. All who are baptized into the

Saviour are sons of Abraham and heirs of all the OT promises (Gal 3:26-29)" (Isaiah 40-55, Lessing, CPH, p.542-3) (**140**)

Despite their weakness by this world's standards, God still chose Abraham and Sarah, blessed them with all the blessings He had promised, blessings for us and all nations. It's because Yahweh is the source of Abraham's calling and blessings. God caused Abraham to multiply. The encouragement to 'multiply' goes back to the Garden of Eden and God's command to be fruitful and multiply, which here we hear God causing to happen. So God points the nation of Israel back to the roots of their faith, the "rock" and "quarry" from which they came. God's promise to Abraham was the bedrock upon which Israel was built, and Sarah the cavity, or quarry, from which Israel was born. Interestingly, "No other near east heathen god ever invited people to remember specific events or dealings with individuals. This appeal to reflect on Yahweh's concrete acts in history is unique."(Isaiah 40-55, Lessing, CPH, p.542-3) (**35**)

Here's the comfort of the Gospel. God comforts Zion and His people. In verse 3, the word comfort is used twice. God is the Comforter and His comfort entails more than just words. God's comfort does more than just relieve despair, it recreates life. As in the Garden of Eden, in the new Eden creation God's recreation will be greater than His beginning act of creation by restoring all things from the corruption of sin.

Part of the reason God chose Abraham, and then through natural church growth the nation of Israel, was to share God's Word of righteousness and salvation with the world around them. Israel's purpose was to take Yahweh's Torah, often translated as "Law" out to all people and nations. In verse 4 God tells His chosen covenant people to "Pay attention", listen carefully, "**for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.**" Yet Yahweh's Torah is NOT simply a code of regulations, it is so much more. Yahweh's Torah is His revealed Word containing both Law and Gospel, His judgement and His unmerited grace. It implies a relationship and not just a cold list of laws. Yahweh's Word was Israel's inheritance, even more than the Promised Land.

Tied in with Yahweh's Torah going out, we hear of Yahweh's justice being set as a light for the peoples. God Word would be sent out far past the boundaries of the Promised Land, because it is for all people, tribes, and nations.

In the Old Testament era, the Gentiles largely waited in vain for God's Word/ His Torah/ His teaching to go forth from Israel (42:4). While there were some brief excursions, by and large nothing happened. Israel's idolatry squashed its witness to the world. Therefore, the teaching and God's Word would have to be carried forward directly from Yahweh through His loyal Servant. They share the same mission. Yet as the Servant seeks Yahweh's will He encounters serious setbacks (50:4-11), and His mission ends in death with the wicked (52:13-53:12). However, His interment (53:9) on Good Friday does not mean the end; He arises victoriously on Easter (52:13; 53:12). Then the risen Servant sends forth His servants in mission.

Here Christ is revealed. All the talk of the righteous Rock is by no means limited to the Old Testament. The New Testament reveals Christ Jesus as the ROCK. In three verses, St. Peter shines the light of Christ on Old Testament passages to reveal who this Rock really is. "**For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."** ⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "**The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,**" ⁸ and "**A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.**" They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."(1 Peter 2:6-8; 1 Pe 2:6 quotes Is 28:16; 1 Pe 2:7 quotes Ps 118:22; and 1 Pe 2:8 quotes Is 8:14).

Since the Fall, all people are sinners: conceived, born, live, and die. The wages of sin is unrighteousness and death. Sin separates us from God. Each sin needs to be atoned for because each and every sin we commit deserves an eternal death sentence by God's righteous judgement. We deserve only condemnation for our sins. Yet this is why Christ came: to save sinners(1 Timothy 1:15). The righteous hammer of justice came down on Jesus who had no sin. Jesus took upon Himself the full punishment for our transgressions. Christ Jesus is the Rock: righteous, holy, and perfect. Isaiah foretold: "**Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.**"(Isaiah 53:4-5) His death satisfied God's righteous demands, and His resurrection is the light to all nations.

What Yahweh begins He also finishes. He sends forth His righteousness and His salvation through His Son to all people. He is calling all to look to His Son, Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour, the ROCK and foundation of our faith, righteousness, and salvation!

God directs us, His people, to His Word, His Torah of Law and Grace. God continues to point us to where He promises to be. Listen, Look, Look, Pay attention, Lift up your eyes and see...His salvation will be forever, and His righteousness will never be dismayed.

This salvation is not about our righteous works, nor is it about our achievements. The humiliation, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ is our life and salvation. Our faith is built on Him as our ROCK and cornerstone. Anything else is sinking sand. For the righteousness and salvation Isaiah promised is no longer just coming, in Christ Jesus it is here! In Christ "**you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**"¹⁰ **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.**"(1 Peter 2:9-10)

Yahweh created a perfect world that was "**very good**"(Gen 1:31), but now is thoroughly corrupted by humanity's fall into sin. Never the less, this does not mean Yahweh is going to annihilate all He made. Through the incarnation of Jesus and His dying and rising again, God rescues and restores all baptized believers in Him. By means of the creaturely elements of water, bread, and wine, we receive the benefits of Christ's forgiveness in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. "Though "**the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth wear out like a garment, and its inhabitants will die like gnats, Yahweh's salvation will be forever, and His righteousness will never end.**"(51:6) On the Last Day, God will raise all the dead and escort all believers into the new heavens and new earth (65:17-25)

So, looking at the righteous Rock, we are blessed with God's Word which clearly reveals Christ Jesus as our Rock and our salvation. He is the Rock on which we stand. By the gift of God given faith, we are declared righteous in God's sight on account of Christ Jesus and His work in our place. In this Rock, Christ Jesus our crucified and risen Lord, we have salvation and eternal life. As Christians we are blessed with the greatest gift in all creation: God's Word and sacraments, His Son, and His righteousness leading us to salvation. Rejoice in the Christ Jesus, our righteous Rock!

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