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Building Saints
I Peter 2:1-12

One of the most famous tourist attractions in the world is the leaning tower of Pisa, located 360 miles NNW of Rome. Alas, this bell tower, begun in 1173, is famous because it is built on soft clay. So the tower begins to lean even before the second story is finished. If construction didn't stop for the next 100 years due to war, it would have totally collapsed. Experts have tried everything to keep the leaning from getting to the point of collapse – wrapping the lower floors with steel bands, adding grout to the foundation, adding counterweights and cables. But it's a challenge; if the foundation isn't secure, in the end a structure won't be stable!

So Peter in our text this morning is trying to help recent Gentile converts find a secure foundation for their faith. He calls these converts, "God's elect," meaning that God has chosen them for life in Christ. And that's the simplest meaning of the thorny doctrine of predestination. People tend to think of "predestination" as either a gloomy fatalism that robs us of free will, or God forbid, that a wrathful God has predetermined, in advance, who's saved and who isn't. But neither of these popular stereotypes is what predestination means.

Simply put, God has an ideal purpose for who and what we can be. We will find our greatest joy and highest potential if we are conformed to the image of Jesus. That's God's ideal plan for each of us. Think of the dreams you have for your children. I dreamed that Erik and Mark would be men of strong faith and good character, that they would find a calling that uses their gifts, that they would be kind and compassionate, and men who cherish their wives. Likewise God, as our Father, longs that we be healthy and whole, and that we contribute to His plan to heal this broken world. For that we are called and predestined!

And Peter calls these new converts to Christ "strangers in the world." As Christians they're now exposed to new values, new teachings, and a new way of life. So they're suddenly questioning the morals and assumptions of their culture.

In the novel, *The Book Thief*, set in Nazi Germany, Hans Hubermann, a painter by trade, finds himself growing more and more uneasy with what Hitler is doing to his homeland. He has Jewish friends and neighbors. A Jew saved his life in World War I. His best customers are Jewish. So why should he hate them? But it feels like a noose is being tightened around his neck. By refusing to join the Nazi party, his customers leave, first one by one, then by dozens. SS agents come and search his house. His own son calls him a fool. So what is he to do when his hometown, the place he's lived all his life, isn't his "home" any longer?

That's what Peter's readers feel like. They're not being persecuted, but they are being ridiculed and harassed. They feel odd. We may know the feeling.

Erik, my oldest son, and I went golfing when he was about eight. We're paired with two chain-smoking, hard-drinking good old boys. On the fourth tee, Erik blurts out, "My dad's a minister." Guy number one promptly hooks his drive thirty yards into a cornfield and guy number two shanks his drive into a sand trap. So I pray, "Lord, just this once, let me hit a good shot." For the first and last time on a golf course, the Lord answers my prayer, and I crush a drive about 260 yards down the center of the fairway, whereupon the guys quickly say, "Ah, you guys play through!" For isn't golf hard enough without having a resident guilt-dispenser judging every cigarette and sip of beer. So how do we live in the world without being of the world? Let's listen to Peter's answer:

I Peter 2:1-12

Our text is very appropriate for this moment in our church's life. This fall we concluded our Forward 150 ministry and capital drive, and you responded magnificently, pledging well over \$1.8 million dollars. But far more important than bricks and mortar, or windows, organs and technology, is the building of the true church of Jesus Christ, you and me. Since we are Christ's body, His hands and feet and voice, how are we to be built up?

Peter first critiques the prevailing culture, "*Rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy and slander.*" Since the word "rid" means "to take off," as one takes off clothing, Peter is thinking of baptism, where converts strip off their old clothing, wade into the water, and are immersed, symbolic of dying with Christ. Then as Christ rises from the dead, the converts rise from the water, departing from their old life, and are clothed in new, white robes, expressive of new life. We Christians are called to be distinctive!

So we seek to rid ourselves of malice, of any vindictive longing to do harm, of the sentiment, "don't get mad, get even." We seek to rid ourselves of deceit and duplicity, or of hypocrisy, of play-acting, appearing to be something that we aren't. We seek to rid ourselves of envy, of the acidic resentment that corrodes our souls, like what King Saul feels when Israel cries, "*Saul killed his thousands, but David killed his tens of thousands.*" And Saul's heart burns, "Why that damn kid!" And we seek to rid ourselves of slander, of using words to tarnish another's reputation. By contrast, let our motives be pure and authentic, gracious and truthful, kind and good. Peter's vision is to first clear away the rubble, so that our church can be unified and built on a firm foundation.

Then Peter calls his readers to come to Jesus, to come freely, at any time, in any place, in any circumstance, without fear knowing that Jesus will welcome us. For Jesus is our cornerstone, a large, solid, immovable foundation. Even in this church building, our elevator can't go down to Centennial Hall, our basement, because the footings, our foundation, are so large. And those footings have stood secure for 150 years.

So if we want a firm foundation for life, we build our lives upon Jesus, who promises to be with us always. I've told you the dramatic story of Bill, a man in my church in MI, who made his way from Czechoslovakia through Germany and France, down to Lisbon to escape Nazism. He travels at night, but one mid-day while napping under a hedge, a troop of German soldiers stop for lunch on the other side of the hedge. For two hours, they linger, as Bill trembles in fear, every moment fighting the urge to get up and run. And what steels Bill's nerves? He recites over and over, "The Lord is my rock and my foundation." "The Lord is my rock and my foundation." That's why we sing:

*O Christ the great foundation, On which your people stand.
To preach Your true salvation, in every age and land:
Pour out Your Holy Spirit, to make us strong and pure,
To keep the faith unbroken, as long as worlds endure.*

The cornerstone in an ancient building is placed with exquisite care. It is leveled and squared, so every other stone can be placed rightly. Jesus says as much when He ends the Sermon on the Mount, *"All who hear these words of mine and put them into practice are like the wise who build their house on the rock. The rains come down, the streams rise, and the winds blow and beat against that house, yet it does not fall, because its foundation is the rock."*

Jesus Christ is our foundation, not causes or personalities or our fellowship, as important as these things may be. Jesus is our foundation, so we seek Him in prayer; we obey His word; we ask for the power of His Holy Spirit. From Him, we learn how to love, how to live, how to forgive, and how to serve, allowing Him to build us into a spiritual home, a place of refuge and safety, or rest and nourishment, a place of radical hospitality, using the core meaning of radical, which means "to the roots," or "at the very essence."

Having laid the foundation, Jesus Christ, Peter now builds the identity of a biblical church, *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* Remember Peter's readers feel estranged and ridiculed, so they lack self-confidence.

"But don't worry," says Peter. "Let your identity and self-worth be based on God's love." You are a chosen people! American Para-Olympian swimmer, Jessica Tatiana Long was born, without legs, in rural Siberia to a sixteen-year old mother and a fifteen-year old father. Her parents, being dirt poor and having no resources to care for her, put her up for adoption. Adopted by an American family and introduced to swimming, she now holds thirteen world records, and in the London Para-Olympic Games, she won five gold and two silver medals. Jessica brims with confidence and beauty, and testifies that her favorite Bible verse is John 15:16 where Jesus says, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."* "I'm not adopted," she says, "I am chosen," and so are we, by the living God!

Peter tells his flock, “You are a chosen people,” and you are a royal priesthood.” You have direct access to God. The moment Jesus dies the great curtain in the temple which stands before the holy of holies, thought to be God’s most intimate presence, is torn in two. So we can approach Almighty God freely and without fear.

Peter continues, “You are a holy nation, set apart for a purpose, to shed light wherever there is darkness. “And you belong to Me,” says God, “and you can call me by an intimate name, ‘Father,’ or more literally ‘Daddy!’”

And Peter concludes, “*Though you may be foreigners and strangers in this world, because your true citizenship is in heaven, do this: abstain from evil and live such good lives that others will give thanks and give glory to God.*”

A verse that sustains me in difficult moments is I Corinthians 16:13, “*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; have courage, be strong, and do everything in love.*” We are made for goodness and love. So we take the high road; we do not repay evil for evil; we remember that a gentle answer turns away wrath that love is stronger than hatred, and revenge, in the end, isn’t sweet, but turns to ashes in our mouths. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa puts it this way:

Don’t struggle and strive, my child. There is no race to complete, no point to prove, no obstacle course to conquer for you to win my love. I loved you before creation drew its first breath. I dreamed you as I molded Adam from the mud. I saw you wet from the womb. And I loved you. So take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Don’t exhaust yourself, racing ahead. Walk beside me.”

I know the demands on your life. Don’t strive for perfection; don’t bend yourself out of shape to conform to the image you have of me. I know you, for I knit you together in your mother’s womb. So seek your deepest joy and you will find me there. Do what delights you, and you will be working with me, walking with me. Finding your life, hidden in me.

Ask me any question. My answer is love. When you want to hear my voice, listen for love. How can you delight me? Love. Offer tough, unbreakable, unshakable love. Are you looking for me? You will find me in love. Do you want to know me? Then love! Do you yearn to know me? Then love!

The spiritual heart of Forward 150 isn’t the projects. It is the building of a spiritual home on the cornerstone who is Jesus Christ. The spiritual heart of Forward 150 is claiming our identity as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, to praise God and shed light wherever there is darkness. And it is to steadfastly do good, in the words of John Wesley, “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.” Amen.