

SLD05.15.11 Fourth Easter Capital Campaign Kickoff
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans
I Peter 2:4-10

“It’s Our Turn”

This morning’s passage comes from the first letter Peter writes to the Christians living in Asia Minor, the area now known as Turkey. Well, the disciple Peter didn’t actually write the letter himself – it’s dated after he died and written in a manner far more sophisticated than a Galilean fisherman could possibly produce, especially in a second language. It was probably written by a follower of Peter’s, someone who wrote in the spirit of his teachings, as a kind of extension of Peter’s ministry, a practice common to the time. There’s little doubt Peter would have agreed with the sentiments expressed in the letter.

Anyway, this first published letter of Peter’s is addressed to those whom he calls "the exiles of the Dispersion;" those Christians of his day who had become aliens in pagan lands. It’s not that they’d been kidnapped or run out of their own countries or anything; there’s more than one way a person can feel like an exile – there’s being exiled from a profession, a family, a marriage, a community, even from ourselves and from God.

And, sure enough, the exiles to whom Peter is writing have not been physically displaced. Rather, their rejection by mortals is taking place *in situ*, in their own homelands, as a result of their beliefs and practices, their monotheism, their refusal to participate in the local pagan festivals. Indeed, the early Christians of Asia Minor came to be regarded as a counter-cultural fringe group whose values undermined those of more acceptable society.

And, as so often happens to people who are repeatedly harassed or rejected, they eventually begin to internalize their oppression, to identify with their marginalization, to integrate their culture’s rejection of them into their own self-identity. In fact, the writer of I Peter

catches wind that they actually beginning to lose a grip on who and whose these Christians really are. So he sends to his Asian friends words of comfort, hope, and reorientation.

“Folks, remember who you are!” he urges. “Who your family is, who your Creator is, who your Savior is. Keep your eyes on the power and hope showered on you by the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Come to Jesus!” urges Peter. “Come *back* to Jesus, a living stone, who, though he was rejected by mortals, is nevertheless chosen and precious in God’s sight. Become like living stones yourselves, and let yourself be build into a spiritual house! For you, too, are chosen and precious in God’s sight. A royal priesthood! A holy nation! I know these times are a little rough on you, but just don’t forget that no matter what goes on, you are *God’s* people. God *own* people.

“Once you were not a people,” Peter goes on. “There was a time you were just a bunch of individuals, cruising along, minding your own business. But then God gathered you in, and claimed you, and named you as a body of Christ, and now you are God’s own people of 2nd century Asia Minor. So let the life living in you be the life of God; let your hands be the hands and heart of Jesus; and let the breath you’re breathing be the breath of the Holy Spirit. That’s what *you* do.

“And what *God* does? Well, remember how ‘the stone that the builders rejected became the very head of the corner?’— well, that’s what *God* does. So, regardless of what anybody thinks, y’all just concentrate on becoming living stones yourselves, and let God build the lot of you into a spiritual house.”

Well, I say that what the writer of I Peter says to those cranky, forgetful, self-exiled folks

of Asia Minor goes for us, too. You and I and the person sitting next to you, we're also part of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, comprised of all the seekers and knowers of Jesus in all his forms and revelations of all time in the whole wide world. You and I are also God's own people.

Closer in than that, we're God's own people of Emory Presbyterian Church.

To be sure, there was a time when we were not a people, when we were just discreet individuals going about our lives with all our separate paths and dreams and agendas. I mean, the Grosses were in Michigan, and Molly was down at the Kelly church, and Johnson was over in Kenya, and Heather was over in Germany, and I was out in California supporting folks servicing Coke machines, until God gathered us all in, and claimed us, and named us as God's own people of Emory Presbyterian Church.

Go figure.

Only God didn't start that gathering and claiming and naming of God's own people of Emory Presbyterian Church with you and me. No, God started gathering and claiming and naming folks to worship on this land in, oh, the 1830's or so. Then God sparked a handful of adventurers from over at Decatur Pres. to come over here and get serious about community. In 1941, God got about 125 of 'em to step out in faith and break ground on a sanctuary. This sanctuary. Took eight years for those early living stones to let themselves be built into a spiritual house, and what a spiritual house! A spiritual house Ann Morris's friend, landscape architect Spencer Tunnell, calls "the prettiest church in Atlanta."

Oh, we all know Emory's founders had in mind this additional mongo cathedral-like building they'd stretch across the front lawn, but thank you, sweet Jesus, that wasn't in God's

plan. I mean, what on earth would we do with all that facility now? Why, the heating and air bills alone...!

In any case, what God *did* have in mind for God's own people of Emory Church in 1952 (besides preordained me to be pastor here some 58 years later) were some serious improvements to this church's Sunday School building, church offices and choir room.

Then in the late 50's, God took the living stones of Emory Church, the generation of our parents and grandparents, and cemented them together into a new activities and fellowship building. A decade later God built with those living stones a third floor on the Education building. And then, in more recent decades, new paint, new pews, a new organ, a new kitchen, a new van, a new labyrinth.

Remember, once the folks of Emory Church were not a people at all. But over the last 70 years, God has been gathering, claiming and naming us, and making of us living stones, stones that allow ourselves to be built into this simple, solid, rock-hewn, light-filled, alluring spiritual house of worship.

"You are *my* people," insists God. "Come to Jesus, a living stone, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house."

Well, the folks before us did just that - the proof is all around us. And now, quite simply, it's our turn.

There may have been a time when we were not a people, you and I, but folks, we are now.

You know, a while back I served John Knox Church in Marietta and I was told that their former pastor, Jim Whalen, I think his name was, used always to end their worship by saying,

“You know, it’s no accident that you’re here today.” I always thought it was kind of a weird way to end worship, but now it’s exactly what I want to say to you today: it is no accident that you’re here today. It is no accident that you’ve hooked, or been hooked, into this community. It’s no accident that Emory Church means something to you, that you care about it, that you have felt cared *by* it.

It is no accident that you are here today, no accident that I’m preaching this particular sermon on this particular text on this particular Sunday of the Kick Off of this particular Capital Campaign. You and I are God’s own people of Emory Presbyterian Church, a chosen, if peculiar, race; a royal, if inconsistent, priesthood; a holy gaggle of earnest, if rarely fully convinced, seekers; part of a long line of living stones who have been gathered, claimed and named right here at 1886 N. Decatur Rd. for the singular purpose of proclaiming the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. This isn’t just something we choose to do; it’s something God’s keeps doing *with* us.

However you look at it, member, friend, visitor, you and I are God’s own people of Emory Presbyterian Church. And the mighty act God puts before us this fifteenth day of May, in the year of our Lord, 2011, is the replacement of the heating and air systems in all three of our buildings (Lord, have mercy) along with a handful of other urgent property matters.

We who have been given so much by God and our forbearers, we who have been spiritually nurtured, enriched and recharged in this place, we who have been blessed and sustained and accompanied by this community, we who have been gathered in fellowship, blessed in worship, inspired in mission; we who have welcomed others, served others, encouraged others, taught children, served lemonade, counted money, smoked meat, baked

cookies, hosted luncheons, hammered nails, mopped floors and line danced, we, you and I are God's living stones of Emory Church today, called, through prayerful planning, thoughtful design, resourceful stewardship, and sacrificial giving, to be built into a spiritual house, a sacred space, a sanctuary for the nurture and discipleship of generations to come.

Do you ever wonder what will be left of you when you die? What legacy you'll leave for those who come after you? Some of us will live on through our children, our art, the works of our lives. Some will leave personal wealth to enrich the persons and causes we love. But the legacy of every single one of today's *living* stones of Emory Church, will be the charming edifice, the vibrant worship, and the faithful work, of...the prettiest church in Atlanta.

Under the leadership of the Session and of Sally Fleming, much, much thought has been put to how best we might go about creating such a legacy. I invite Sally forward now to share with us the process and plans of our 2011 Capital Campaign.

Sally's presentation

It's our turn, now, to come to Jesus, a living stone, and, like living stones, let ourselves be built into a spiritual house that will nurture and share God's Word for generations to come.

May each of us do *our* part, sacrificially, but joyfully, to ensure the future of this sacred place.

To the glory of God. Amen.