

The Scaffold of Hope

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Hope is our theme, these days. In the short scripture we just heard read, I see hope as a scaffold, a structure that supports what God is building. It is a three-part structure that tells the story of salvation in a very few words.

In the beginning, God provides for us. We have everything we need. We choose to turn away. In response, God enters our reality and transforms our state of rejection through pure grace. Finally, God makes something new out of all this, something healing, something better.

But before we talk about that, I want to talk about pelicans. You probably know the pelican as the large water bird with the very big beak, which it uses to scoop up fish. I first encountered the pelican in Roald Dahl's book [‘the Giraffe and the Pelly and Me’](#), in which a monkey, pelican and giraffe immigrate to England to work as window cleaners. You may remember that it is the pelican's job is to fly the water up to the windows in her beak.

Pelicans are very interesting, but I was surprised to find a carving of a pelican in Ely Cathedral, in the English city where I grew up. When I was a kid we would often go to the Cathedral for school trips. I have a picture of the building here. Parts of it are 900 years old, but like all living buildings it is never finished being built. The part with the carving of the pelican is not quite 700 years old, on the north-east corner. The building is filled with carvings and statues of saints and figures from Christian history.

Here is a picture of the inside, with some nice Victorian couples wandering around. I found these pictures on the internet while I was trying to find that carving of the pelican that surprised me when I was a child. I couldn't find that exact image, but it turns out that the pelican is a very popular image in medieval Christian art. Take a look at this section of tapestry.

The Pelican mother is pricking herself and offering drops of her blood to feed her children, newly hatched in her nest. Medieval bestiaries report this strange characteristic of the pelican, that she willingly gives up her blood, either to feed her children, or in some older versions, to bring them back to life.

As you can see from these other depictions in brass and stained glass, it's a very popular image which churches used to symbolise God's willingness to suffer to bring life to us. It is called 'the Pelican in her Piety', and it represents how people thought of Jesus on the cross. Just for the record, the pelican in nature does not do this. Likely the legend comes from observing pelicans feeding hatchlings from their pouches, but it makes a very good story - it is a bit gruesome, it is memorable, and it is meant to teach you about God.

But this legend has some limiting theology. This version from the Book of Beasts, translated from Latin in 1954, presents a difficult metaphor for God:

The Pelican is excessively devoted to its children. But when these have been born and begin to grow up, they flap their parents in the face with their wings, and the parents, striking back, kill them. Three days afterwards the mother pierces her breast, opens her side, and lays herself across her young, pouring out her blood over the dead bodies. This brings them to life again.

You can draw your own conclusion about why Medieval Christianity found it easier to represent God as a large water bird, rather than simply drawing upon the scriptural image of God as a human mother, feeding her children from her own body.

Like newborn babies, be hungry for nothing but milk - the pure milk of the word that will make you grow into salvation, now that you have "tasted that our God is good."

This is the simplest and earliest metaphor for God's goodness - the mother who nurtures her child out of her own being. To explore the economic and spiritual significance of this foundational relationship between mother and child, I would suggest starting with Diem's [sermon](#) of May 17, 2015. It feels doubly appropriate to name this on Mother's Day, historically a day when mothers demand an end to warfare and waste, demanding the right to care what happens to their children and all children throughout their lives.

The fact is, not every human gets the chance to begin their life in the full assurance of nurture and safety. And those that do, are not able to build adult lives free of coercion and the temptation to take advantage of other people.

In our scripture, the narrative changes to invitation, the metaphor changes to stones. Christ is a living stone, and we are living stones too, coming together to form a holy sanctuary. But this sanctuary is made up of stones that have been rejected. The writer of the letter draws upon the images of the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah to describe this strange paradox. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Jesus was rejected. Jesus was misunderstood. Although we do not face his particular suffering, there is a connection between what Jesus suffered and what each of us experience. Jesus experienced the particular pain of rejection that every one of us knows at some time in our lives.

Each of us has experienced rejection, wounding. Each of us has suffered the loss of safety, surety. However privileged a life you have led, you have known fear. It would be too easy to list racism, sexism, colonialism, the big systems that make some people cruel, some people numb, and many people suffer. I'm talking about all of that and I am talking about small, daily acts of violence. Repeating a hurtful rumour. Taking what is not yours to take. Cancelling people, shunning people, the ban. Pretending not to see someone in crisis. Misgendering. Hoarding food. Making someone doubt themselves. Giving someone a reason to cry, or flee, or hate.

All of us have participated in this human tendency to reject, to oppose, to deny, to destroy. “I do not understand. What I want to do, I do not do, but instead I do what I hate” (Romans 7). Humans have no trouble justifying all manner of evil against others. It is one thing that unites us. And when we suffer from what others do, we are united with Jesus who suffers it along with us.

At this point there is a part of me that objects. I want to say ‘of course not everyone suffers the same’. I want to say ‘some benefit from the oppression that others suffer’. I want to say that the rejection that one person faces in their life cannot be compared to the rejection of another person’s life.

This is the week where I learned about another lynching of a young Black man in America. This is the week where I made the same choice made by the mother of Ahmaud Arbery, the choice not to watch the video of his murder.

In a world where this can happen, it is offensive to say ‘we all suffer’, just as it is offensive to say ‘we all sin’. Some sins are mortal. As a matter of justice we must admit that one person’s guilt must be greater than the guilt of another person. We must discern where one person’s pain is more pressing than the pain of another.

This is true, as a matter of justice. But God has concerns other than pure justice. God has a vision for restitution and reconciliation, which must include healing the suffering of all people. A devotion to justice alone stifles the levelling gifts of mercy and compassion. In mercy, all pain is honoured. It is not measured. It does not have to be claimed, or defended, or proven. Jesus simply lives it, transforms it, and invites in the healing.

The stone that the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone. That fragment of poetry describes the wonder-working power of God, the life-giving, resurrecting impulse at the heart of our faith. This is our hope. That we, even though we reject and are rejected, even though we are in a state of disgrace, we may be brought back together by grace.

God’s grace is simple - it is freely given. It is not earned by us. God’s grace is devastating. You can never earn it. You cannot even negotiate for it. You can only accept it, as many times as you need to. The grace of God for me, in my failings, is the same absolute grace for those who murdered. Those who hoarded. Those who lied and misled and stole.

God’s plan unfolds in time and space through the frailties and failings of you and me. That which we reject, suppress, or kill becomes the healing power, transformed into the scaffolding of hope. This paradox is what the poets call the [economy of mercy](#). The currency of grace. It is the workshop where the craft of reconciliation is finely honed.

But how is this to happen?

When we bring our failings to Jesus, when we honestly name the bad things that we have done and the good that we failed to do, Jesus asks to take those things away. He shows them not to be the most powerful factor in our lives and in our world. He proves that his resurrection life can be lived starting with each moment.

This grace that we are given. We have to be able to admit our shortcomings in order to admit that we need this grace. Our church practices forms of mutual aid. We pray for one another. We try to share our burdens. How would that work if we all pretended that we had no burdens? Who would dare to pray for help, if everyone else only offered mild thanksgivings for expected blessings?

Mutual aid is mutual vulnerability. We pursue this as a spiritual practice, not simply for its material benefits. If we can model honesty and vulnerability in this household of God, we make it easier for one another to accept the grace and the presence of Jesus.

It's just like being a baby. A baby doesn't just need food, cleaning. A baby needs to cry, and it needs to have its cry answered.

So I have two things to say. If you need to have that cry answered - if you need to taste and see that God is good - then know that the way is open to follow Jesus, and the people of God are here to help you lift your burden to Jesus. Hear these words of assurance.

Come to Christ—a living stone, rejected by mortals but approved nonetheless, chosen and precious in God's eyes. And you are living stones as well.

And if you are already part of this living temple - if you have indeed found something nurturing, enriching, and flavourful in the resurrecting work of Jesus, then remember who you were, know who you are, and hear these words of assurance.

You, however, are a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart" to sing the praises of the One who called you out of [shadow] into the wonderful, divine light. Once you were "not a people," but now you are the people of God; once there was "no mercy for you," but now you have found mercy.

Because of what God has done for us, we have been changed. And because of what God has done for us we cannot ever deny the importance of grace.

The scaffolding of hope has been raised. The living stones are assembled, aligned with the maligned, the cornerstone once rejected, now firmly in place. God is building something new in the world. Thanks be to God.

References

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Diem Lafortune, May 17, 2015, 'Patriarchy! Be gone! Revalidating the Gifts of the Mother in the Great Mystery', <https://tumc.ca/?p=1446>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TG0Jy0IgOg>

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Scripture references adapted from The Inclusive Bible, 2009

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn babies, be hungry for nothing but milk - the pure milk of the word that will make you grow into salvation, now that you have "tasted that our God is good."

Come to Christ—a living stone, rejected by mortals but approved nonetheless, chosen and precious in God's eyes. And you are living stones as well: you are being built as an edifice of spirit, to become a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. For scripture has it,

"See, I am laying a cornerstone in Zion;
an approved stone, and precious.
Those who put their faith in it
will not be shaken."

The stone is precious for you who have faith. But for those without faith,

"The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,"

and, at the same time,

"an obstacle and a stumbling block."

Those who stumble and fall are the disbelievers in God's word; it is their destiny to do so.

You, however, are a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart" to sing the praises of the One who called you out of the darkness into the wonderful, divine light. Once you were "not a people," but now you are the people of God; once there was "no mercy for you," but now you have found mercy.

Questions for Contemplation

1. How is hope like a scaffold? What does hope support being built?
2. If babies are nurtured and cared for by their parents, what messages (conscious or otherwise) are shared about God? What messages (positive or negative) are shared about society?
3. Do you consider yourself part of the holy structure that God is building? What are the parts of yourself that do not seem to have a place in God's structure?

4. Spend a minute or two thinking over anything meaningful or difficult in the sermon. When you are ready, pray as simple a prayer as you can manage, letting God know how you are feeling, and what you need at this time.