

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Longing for Milk

1 Peter 2:1-3

May 10, 2020

The scripture readings for today are about big things, life and death, as they should be in the Easter season. In Acts 7 Stephen has been arrested under accusation of blasphemy. In his own defense, he recites history from Abraham to Moses to Jesus, recalling how supposedly righteous people over and over again rejected God's chosen messengers. By the time he finished, his accusers were enraged. It turns out it wasn't so much blasphemy against God they were worried about, it was insults to themselves that bothered them. They stoned Stephen. The first Christian martyr. At the moment of his death, with great faith, he cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And with great mercy, he cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Even to the moment of death, his life and his heart belonged to the Lord.

The Gospel reading from John is also about life and death. Jesus is assuring his disciples, who were at that time already feeling the pinch of their discipleship, that their lives and their deaths belonged to the Lord. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you."

I heard someone say once that this passage--John 14--is the best argument for using the King James version of the Bible. In the King James version, Jesus says, "In my father's house are many mansions." In modern translations, he says, "In my father's house are many rooms." Well, which would you rather have waiting for you the preacher asked—a room or a mansion? Point scored for Team KJV.

The reading from 1 Peter isn't as much directly about death and the threat of death as the context for Acts 7 and John 14, but 1 Peter is written to a people in exile. They are suffering. They are Christians, but they are suffering. Being a Christian has not meant that they don't suffer no matter what some false preachers like to say. Being Christian does not mean we don't suffer, but it can mean how we suffer. Christians meet illness with prayer and keep praying until we see healing. Christians pray healing for themselves, for their loved ones, and for the world. This, too, is a time for prayer. Being Christians means how we suffer. Christians meet persecution with endurance and love their enemies even to the point of death. Christians aren't seeking to be offensive or obnoxious to anyone, but if our way of life doesn't ever put us at odds with the way of the world, if there's no sandpaper ever, then how have we inherited the legacy of Stephen and all the others whose faith cost them their lives?

So, while 1 Peter isn't exactly about death, it's definitely about how we live as Christians and Peter wants you to know just how exalted that is. In Chapter 2, Peter describes Christians in the church as living stones building up a spiritual house. We're a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, a people of God who proclaim the excellencies of him who called the world out of

darkness into God's marvelous light. Once you were not a people but now you are a people. Now you have received mercy.

How do those shoes fit? When you look in the mirror do you see a living stone being built into a spiritual house? Do you see a holy priest looking back at you? Do you see a person chosen among all the peoples of the world? Do you see a person proclaiming the excellencies of God, calling the world from darkness to light?

Do you? Maybe you do. But I think a lot of us when we look in the mirror see someone who could really stand to get a haircut, could bear to lose a few pounds, wonders what different body part will hurt today, thinks about the things that need to get done in too little time and with too little money, and also looks forward to going back to bed that night.

Now that's not everyone. There are those who sing in the shower, greet the morning mirror with a smile and a how-ya-doing beautiful, and who truly believe today is the day the Lord has made, and I am, too. But still, how many even annoying morning people see themselves in the fullness of the image we're told is true about us. *Living stones, royal priests, people calling the world from darkness to light.* We may not see it in the foggy mirror in the morning, but we see it in clear image of scripture, the mirror of God's truth.

How do we live into the image God has for us? Peter says: Drink your milk.

In the hands of another writer, the metaphor of milk is used to describe childlike things. Milk is only for children and should be left behind when you grow up. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul uses it to insult the Corinthians for their immaturity. He says, I gave you milk, not solid food for you were not ready for it. You're still not ready. The metaphor is that milk is for babies while solid food is for maturing, growing Christians.

The author of Hebrews uses the images in the same way. You need milk, not solid food. Milk is for the unskilled, for children. Solid food is for the mature. The author of Hebrews wants the readers to grow up, to leave behind the elementary things and go on to spiritual maturity. (Hebrews 5.11f) There's this idea that at some point you should grow up and stop with the basics. You should mature to something more complex. CS Lewis spoke of the delight of sitting over a tough piece of theology with a pencil and a pipe. No doubt there's truth in this. One of the imperatives of growing as a Christian is continuing to stretch your faith. Too often children make professions of faith at a certain age with understanding appropriate to their development, but then don't grow in their understanding of the faith from that point forward. And then years later they wonder how they ever believed something so simple.

What happened? Well, their minds grew and their experiences grew and their understanding of the complexities of the world and themselves grew, but their faith didn't. And then they realize the yawning gap. The gap is not in Christianity. The gap is in their growth in their faith. One of the great gifts we can give to our young people and college students is to help them grow a

faith sufficiently mature for the challenges of life. To eat solid food, the kind that sustained people like Stephen whose faith endured through great suffering even until the end.

But, also, one of the great gifts is to remember that no matter how much we grow, we never outgrow the simplicity of faith in Jesus. It's Peter who calls us back home. Unlike other writers, Peter does not make the same distinction between milk for baby Christians and solid food for serious, mature believers. Here we are told, without distinction, long for milk. Like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk. For Peter, no matter how much we grow and mature and are built into a spiritual living temple, we never outgrow the need for nourishment from the basics, the foundations, the simple things. Peter's use of the imperative here accentuates how central this seeking is to the believer's new life in Christ. Some churches in the second and third centuries took up the practice of giving honey and milk to the newly baptized attesting to how powerful this imagery was to the lives of the faithful.

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It not just for the believer's new life in Christ. It is for all our lives. When we long for what Peter calls pure, spiritual milk—the nourishment of scripture and daily prayer and the giving and receiving of the love of God, and thanksgiving—felt and expressed—and generosity and looking in the mirror and seeing a child of God who is growing up in salvation.

You have tasted that the Lord is good. This is the premise of it all. You have tasted the Lord is good. It seems clear that Peter has not only the metaphor of milk in mind, but also, particularly, the eucharist in mind. The eucharist is where suffering exiles would have tasted the goodness of the Lord whether or not in their exile, they could receive eucharist at the time of this letter. They would remember the sweetness, the goodness of sharing the Lord's table with their brothers and sisters. And they, and we with them, are being called to remember when we tasted the goodness of the Lord, and long for that taste again. It is by that taste and by the longing for it—by the abundance of God's blessings, and in suffering their lack—that we grow in salvation and become fully who God is making us to be. This is the pure, spiritual milk that nourishes our souls all the days of our lives no matter what comes our way.

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