

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

“Rock” is the image for today’s worship devotions. The prophet Isaiah compares his religious heritage to a rock. Jesus gives Simon the name Peter — or, as we might say it today, “The Rock.” Earlier in Matthew, at the Sermon on the Mount, we heard about Jesus’ teaching as a rock on which we are to build. Although not in today’s readings, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4 that the rock from which water flowed was Christ. According to Jewish legend, the miraculous rock followed the Israelites throughout their time in the wilderness, perpetually providing water.

For Christians, the water of baptism follows the body of Christ, watering us throughout our journey. Our confession and forgiveness connect us to that same baptismal water — the water that flows from the rock of Christ’s teaching.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
whose steadfast love is everlasting,
whose faithfulness endures from generation to generation.
Amen.

Trusting in the mercy of God, let us confess our sin.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Reconciling God,
we confess that we do not trust your abundance,
and we deny your presence in our lives.
We place our hope in ourselves
and rely on our own efforts.
We fail to believe that you provide enough for all.
We abuse your good creation for our own benefit.
We fear difference and do not welcome others
as you have welcomed us.
We sin in thought, word, and deed.
By your grace, forgive us;
through your love, renew us;
and in your Spirit, lead us;
so that we may live and serve you in newness of life.
Amen.

Beloved of God,
by the radical abundance of divine mercy
we have peace with God through † Christ Jesus,
through whom we have obtained grace upon grace.
Our sins are forgiven.
Let us live now in hope.
For hope does not disappoint,
because God’s love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Gathering Song

This week, we are led by the Faith and Life Male Choir of the Mennonite Church of Manitoba, Canada, in singing Lord Jesus Christ, Be Present Now (ELW #527).

Here is the video link: <https://vimeo.com/66086950#t=84s>. (Press the blue “play” button to start the video.)

- 1 *Lord Jesus Christ, be present now;
our hearts in true devotion bow.
Thy Spirit send with grace divine,
and let thy truth within us shine.*
- 2 *Unseal our lips to sing thy praise
our souls to thee in worship raise;
make strong our faith, increase our light;
that we may know thy name aright.*
- 3 *'Til we with saints in glad accord
sing, "Holy, holy is the Lord!"
And in the light of heaven above
shall see thy face and know thy love.*
- 4 *All glory to the Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit, Three in One!
To thee, O blessed Trinity,
be praise throughout eternity!*

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

O God, with all your faithful followers of every age,
we praise you, the rock of our life.
Be our strong foundation and form us into the body of your Son,
that we may gladly minister to all the world,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Isaiah:

- ¹Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
- ²Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
- ³For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.
- ⁴Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
- ⁵I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.

⁶Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be forever,
and my deliverance will never be ended. (Isaiah 51)

*The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

A reading from the Psalms:

¹I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I will sing your praise.
²I will bow down toward your holy temple and praise your name,
because of your steadfast love and faithfulness;
for you have glorified your name and your word above all things.
³When I called, you answered me;
you increased my strength within me.
⁴All the rulers of the earth will praise you, O Lord,
when they have heard the words of your mouth.
⁵They will sing of the ways of the Lord,
that great is the glory of the Lord.
⁶The Lord is high, yet cares for the lowly,
perceiving the haughty from afar.
⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;
you stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies; your right hand shall save me.
⁸You will make good your purpose for me;
O Lord, your steadfast love endures forever; do not abandon the works of your hands. (Psalm 138)

A reading from Romans:

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12)

*Word of God. Word of life.
Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.
Glory to you, O Lord.*

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on

earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16)

*The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.*

Reflection on the Readings

In our reading today from Isaiah, verse 6 caught my attention like never before:

*the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats.*

There is no way around it—this is alarming imagery! Perhaps the reason it connected so strongly with me this time around is the context of this year of 2020, and even this week. Not only do we have the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19, but we also have before us the news announcements of this past week. A new record for the hottest recorded temperature on Earth was set in Death Valley at 130°F. (Observers say that it was hot enough for to cause the unofficial temperature display to start behaving strangely.) Abnormal wildfires continue in California and Colorado while even more wildfires in Ukraine release radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Hurricane force winds sped across Iowa leaving hundreds of thousands without power—thousands of them still, almost two weeks later. Alaskan salmon are found to be shrinking in size. Canada’s last fully intact ice shelf has now broken apart. And a newly released report identifies evidence that Greenland’s ice sheet may have now melted past “the point of no return.” Together, these events are representative of an enormous transition for the world and its peoples—a terribly disorienting transition.

Isaiah’s words are meant for a people in transition—a people who are exiled and disoriented. Moving, changing jobs, personal transitions are all things that in “normal times” can mix up our lives by taking us out of our patterns. Such transitions are even more disorienting when they are forced upon us. When things that seem to be beyond our control—like climate change and pandemic and economic chaos—bring additional disruption—even relatively small things like wearing face coverings and delaying funerals and not visiting family or friends in person and not gathering in person for worship—the disorientation is magnified and worsened by loss, remorse, confusion, or anger. We experience it as forced, unwanted, and even hostile change.

What we hear today from Isaiah is part of a powerful pastoral sermon that, despite the lines that I highlighted above, is meant to bring comfort and hope to a community struggling to recover from mass disorientation. The prophet’s job is to heal the wounds of this unwanted situation. He delivers this sermon in a form of poetry that urges people to emerge from the invisible edges of social and theological ruin and give voice to their experiences.

In this sermon, Isaiah challenges the people—us—to open our eyes and ears again. He demands imagination and new perspective. We hear startling imperatives: “Listen!” and “Look!” and “Lift up!” The commands pile upon one another and are meant to engage us and move us from our confusion and panic. God is speaking through the prophet to draw us toward good news.

Beyond the broader context of the week and year, there was also a specific disorientation of the people that Isaiah was addressing: the loss of a place of worship. For the people of Israel, this had been Zion. Zion was God’s dwelling in Jerusalem. Zion was a physical place, a material temple, an Israelite mountain. But Zion was also a sacred space that marked the heartbeat of the people’s faith. Zion was not just a place—it was God’s presence with Israel. The destruction of the temple destroyed this sacred space and wiped out the presence of God. For the exiles living in Babylon, the ruined Zion must have seemed worthless.

It represented a fading past made irrelevant by time and distance. Israel held only fragments of Zion in its memory. These fragments were of no use to anyone. Indeed, the fragmented memory of Zion may have only caused more pain and disorientation as exiles sought to rebuild their lives within a “new normal.”

The poetry of Isaiah recognizes all this, but this is not where it ends. Isaiah's poetry and message also brings renewal and hope. He does it with a rapid succession of powerful images: Exodus, the ancestral traditions, Eden, Mosaic instruction, and creation. Each fragmented image is delivered with poetic urgency.

"Look to the rock, ...to the quarry, ...to Abraham, ...and to Sarah." These words point us to the original call to follow God. Sarah and Abraham remind us of the lonely position of being called from the known to the unknown. Their call models for us the confidence to follow God even during disoriented and confusing times. Like Abraham's call, the rock emphasizes the power of Israel's origin. God called Abraham with a solid and sure promise, just as the rock is solid and sure. Indeed, "rock" is frequent way of naming God (especially in the Psalms and Deuteronomy 32). This reminder of our origin in God's rock provides for us a basis for confidence today.

The second metaphor, "the quarry" literally means "the hole of the pit." With our region's mining history and long-term effects nearby, the poetic image is not wasted on us! Like Sarah's barren womb, this image is empty. Elsewhere in the Bible, the "pit" refers to a place of suffering and distance from God. For example, Psalm 28 places the "rock" and the "pit" in juxtaposition, showing that the pit is the place to which one descends during periods of divine silence.

And so, the rock and the pit recall both the firm presence and the empty absence of God in Israel's past. God's power is to be trusted, like a rock and like Abraham's call. However, God's absence, like Sarah's barren womb and like the hole in the pit, is an impossible chasm. But the hole is not the end of the story. From the impossible, from the disoriented, from suffering...a great future can be born.

Isaiah helps us to see this by poetically playing with time. The prophet folds time back upon itself to create a reality that sits above time. He moves us between past and future. In verse 3, a past Eden is summoned as a future place. God speaks through Isaiah to interrupt Israel's story of destruction, desertification, and forced migration. In doing so, God ends the tyranny of a tragic narrative that ends in exile by pushing the past into the future. An impossible waste-place becomes the setting for new growth. Eden is possible once again.

One startling detail must be noted. While the phrase "garden of God" is used, this Eden is not a garden of plants. Instead of vegetative growth, this Eden is vocal—it is a garden filled with voice and song. Instead of oak, walnut, and hickory trees, this desert waste-place will be filled with blooms of joy and buds of thanksgiving. Voices of expression will form Zion's new Eden—a space for gathering anew in worship!

Defying the logic and logistics of postal and package delivery services and budgetary constraints, Isaiah announces that this good news will get delivered everywhere and to everyone! And it will happen swiftly—no delays! "My salvation has gone out," is the promise we receive on behalf of the far-reaches of the world—even those on the endangered coastlands who face rising seas.

Instead of shrinking away, the community that began with Abraham and Sarah will grow! And God's salvation for God's people will be with that community. Forever. Never ended. That will be our place. A rock flowing with the water of baptismal birth, forgiveness, and renewal. Amen.

Hymn of the Day

Turning to Bound Brook United Methodist Church in Bound Brook, New Jersey, we find leadership for the hymn, "We Sing to You, O God, the Rock who Gave Us Birth" (ELW #791).

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/C9GbRepA7D4>.

1 *We sing to you, O God,
 the Rock who gave us birth,
 let our rejoicing sing
 your name in all the earth.
 To you, O God, let songs be raised,
 in joyful hymns, our feast of praise.*

2 *We wandered far from home
out in a desert land,
you shielded with your love
our fearful pilgrim band.
You kept us safe within your arms
and sheltered us against the storm.*

4 *O God, eternal God,
we hide within your wings,
the everlasting arms
to whom our praises ring.
Your word is true, your way is just,
You are the God in whom we trust.*

Prayers of Intercession

Held together in one body by the Spirit of Christ, let us pray for the church and the world, responding to each petition with words from today's psalm, "your steadfast love endures forever."

A brief silence.

Bless the church, that despite the hardships experienced during this pandemic, Christians around the globe will stand firm on the rock, who is Christ. Support pastors, deacons, and congregational committees during this difficult time. Give wisdom to churches that are considering when and how to resume their communal worship schedule.

A brief silence.

Unfailing God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Bless the earth, that it be saved from ecological harm. Restore all lands and seas to the beauty and vigor that you intend. Protect animals whose habitat is endangered. Train us to be gardeners of your creation. We pray for those suffering the effects of destructive wild fires, derecho wind storms, and scorching heat.

A brief silence.

Creator God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Bless the leaders of nations, that they govern their people with integrity and attend to the needs of the poor. Guard the United States from violence. Give clear purpose to protestors and to police. Inspire our political parties to conduct the election season with honesty and respect for all.

A brief silence.

God of justice, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Bless our various means of communication, our phones, the internet, our postal service, and delivery businesses, that our communities be sustained for fruitful life together.

A brief silence.

Merciful God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Bless students, that whether in class or at home they be kept safe and able to learn. Uphold faculty, teachers, staff, and families and protect all who will be affected by the opening of schools. Form college students to conduct themselves with maturity.

A brief silence.

Benevolent God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Bless all who are in need; all who have tested positive for the virus; the sick and the dying. We pray for the unemployed; for medical workers; for those seeking a vaccine; for those who are overwhelmed with

anxiety about the future. We pray especially for those we name here: Martha, Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, and Marlene

A brief silence.

Compassionate God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

Finally, we pray also for ourselves, that with Christ as our rock, we can stand firm.

A longer period of silence.

Merciful God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

We praise you for the lives of all your faithful people. We mourn the death of those we have loved. Bring us at the end, we pray, into the joy and gladness of life together in you.

A brief silence.

Eternal God, hear our prayer: your steadfast love endures forever.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Let us pray.

God of goodness and growth,
all creation is yours,
and your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
Water and word, wine and bread:
these are signs of your abundant grace.
Nourish us through these gifts,
that we might proclaim your steadfast love
in our communities and in the world,
through Jesus Christ, our strength and our song.
Amen.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Song

From St. Mark Lutheran Church in Aurora, Illinois, Kristin You leads us in singing "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" (ELW #596).

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/AjoDOOCXxdc?t=96>.

1 *My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
no merit of my own I claim,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

Refrain

*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand.*

2 *When darkness veils his lovely face,
I rest on his unchanging grace;
in ev'ry high and stormy gale
my anchor holds within the veil. Refrain*

3 *His oath, his covenant, his blood
sustain me in the raging flood;
when all supports are washed away,
he then is all my hope and stay. Refrain*

4 *When he shall come with trumpet sound,
oh, may I then in him be found,
clothed in his righteousness alone,
redeemed to stand before the throne! Refrain*

Benediction

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

God, the creator, † Jesus, the Christ,
and the Holy Spirit, the comforter,
bless you and keep you in eternal love.
Amen.