

Chips Off the Old Rock
Isaiah 51:1-3
August 23, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

For those of you who didn't have a chance to look at the bulletin, the sermon title today is "Chips Off the Old Rock." You know what saying I'm referring to, right? You see a kid and you say, "oh, he's just a chip off the old block." You mean that the kid looks just like his dad, or sounds just like his dad, or acts just like his dad. I guess it could apply to girls, but it seems like I usually hear it for boys. Sometimes, if a boy is a junior or a "the third," he's even called Chip as a nickname. The point is that the smaller thing, in this case a person, is just like the bigger thing in character and qualities, just a smaller version.

This saying and image is what popped into my head when I read the Isaiah passage. Listen to the first verse again: *Listen 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.*

I'm pretty sure Isaiah means to say "you're all chips off the old block!" It's the same imagery, and it's meant to be an encouragement to those who were in exile. They've been taken away from all the visible reminders of God's promises, removed from their land and home and worship space and all that was familiar. The future seemed bleak, God seemed to have abandoned the promises at best and at worst, God seems to have abandoned the people entirely. But this is not so, Isaiah says. In order to give them hope for the future, Isaiah encourages them to look to the past.

He tells them this, to look to the rock from which they were hewn, the quarry from which they were dug. Look, he's saying, you came from tough people. Then in the next verse, he names Abraham and Sarah as the specific ancestors he's highlighting. I'm not sure what to make of this, but this is the only time in the Old Testament that Sarah is named, outside of the Genesis stories. After her death, only Abraham is referred to. And even he isn't named that often.

But now, at this crucial moment when despair and discouragement are weighing them down, Isaiah in his role as a prophet speaks to remind them specifically of Abraham and Sarah, who had nothing and were nothing when God called them to follow to a land they did not know. And God promised them ridiculous things like descendants that outnumbered the stars and the sand, all starting with a son of their old age. Promises that seemed far fetched and unlikely to be fulfilled. But Abraham and Sarah followed and agreed to be the beginnings of God's chosen people.

Abraham and Sarah are the rocks, the quarries, from which the people have been hewn and dug. They believed in hope and God's promises, even when it seemed impossible and even inadvisable. Isaiah brings them to mind, reminds the exiled Israelites of their people, to remind them that they come from, were born from, people who trusted in God despite the odds. It's a reminder both of the trust of Abraham and Sarah and the faithfulness of God.

While we share Abraham and Sarah as ancestors of our faith, there are more faithful people, other hopeful people who trusted in God who can be an encouragement to us now, in the midst of difficult times when we may feel separated from all that we knew, when we can't gather together in the places and ways that we're used to, when the future seems at best hard to see and at worst disastrous.

Before we get close in time to us, let's stop at our New Testament reading for today, where we find another rock of faith. Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God. And Jesus responds that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church. We are chips off the rock that is Peter is another way to say that. That doesn't mean Peter was perfect, but it means that the Peter trusted in Jesus, and that Jesus is always faithful.

We look to our past to find hope for our future. Psychologists tell us that one way to get through a hard time is to remember that you have gotten through hard times before, and to remember what you did and how you did it. I hope you've found that to be true for yourselves.

So I thought it might be helpful to us as a church to look to our specific ancestors in the faith at First Presbyterian Church, to find out how they had survived hard times and how they might provide hope for our future. So I pulled up the history book that was last updated in 1977 but first put together in 1936. I read through the whole thing, and one thing that struck me is that this is a church who has been without a full time pastor for far more years than we've had one. Lots of entries in the book tell about student supply pastors from the seminary, or pulpit supply who only came once a month, frequently about pastors who lived elsewhere and came to Luling as if it was a distant mission outpost on the frontier. I don't think this fits anyone's idealized picture of what a church's history might be, but I happen to believe that this has made us stronger as a congregation. Holding together as a congregation without a pastoral leader is deep down in our DNA.

I thought it would be interesting to know what the church was doing during the 1918 flu pandemic—did they also close down in person worship for the sake of themselves and their neighbors? Is that in our DNA too? Well, that's when I remembered what has to have been the most difficult time in our congregation's history. The records are scarce, but the church was closed from 1917 to 1923. I think I remember Etta telling me that the building itself became storage for hay and was in pretty bad shape by the time it opened back up. They didn't start Sunday School back up for two more years, and when they did there were only four students listed.

They survived. We survived. We made it through that tough time, and that rock of our ancestors' faith is the very rock that we're chips off of. Their trust was in the God who is faithful.

I can't tell which author of the history put in this editorial comment, but it's pertinent now: "It has almost been a miracle that so few people could have preserved the structure, but more importantly the church itself. For this we give praise and thanks to God." I like how they differentiate between the structure and the church itself. The church itself is chips off the old rock.

Isaiah gives hope to the exiles by assuring them that they will be restored, that God will comfort their waste places, that they will again be filled with joy and gladness and thanksgiving and song.

You may have noticed that we're singing old favorites today. Those old favorites are another reminder of our past, to give us hope for the future. We are chips off the old rock, as were our ancestors at our church, as were the writers of these hymns, as was Peter, as was Isaiah. Our ancestors Abraham and Sarah held onto faith in the midst of challenge and danger and fear, and so can we, because we're chips off the old rock.