

In the front of our building is a symbolic cornerstone. It reads,
St Paul's on the Plains
Protestant Episcopal
1941

The old name for our denomination was "The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America." In the 1970s it was shortened to, "The Episcopal Church." But when this building was built in 1941, the older name was still in use.

Our cornerstone is more symbolic and less functional. It sits near the corner of the building. But it is not structurally a part of the corner of the building.

Cornerstones always have a symbolic meaning. They are a sign. They signify what the identity of the building is.

But they sometimes have a structural function as well. A functional cornerstone forms part of the foundation of the building.

Originally, cornerstones were always functional. The cornerstone would always be the first stone placed in the new building. The cornerstone would establish the location and structure of the building. Once you placed the cornerstone, the other walls could be built out from it. Other stones were placed in relation to the cornerstone. They were joined together to construct the building.

Our Epistle reading this morning from 1 Peter uses the image of the cornerstone to describe Jesus Christ. Peter tells us, "Come unto him, a living stone... a cornerstone, chosen and precious."¹

This is a wonderful image. For Christians, Jesus is our base, Jesus is our foundation, Jesus is the cornerstone of the Church. The Church is built, as Ephesians says, "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."²

As we sang just a moment ago, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."³

And as we'll sing later in the words of another old hymn, "Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone."⁴

And if Jesus is the foundation, if Jesus is the cornerstone, then we are placed in his church in relationship to him. We are built into a "spiritual house" 1Peter says, in relationship to Jesus.

¹ 1Pet 2:4, 6

² Eph 2:20

³ *Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 525

⁴ *Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 518

That's important for us to remember, especially in our individualistic culture. We're not a bunch of loose stones lying around in a field by ourselves. We're called to be joined and to be mortared together in relationship to Jesus and to each other. Together, Peter says, we form a house, not a physical house, but a spiritual house.

What a wonderful image for us. We've been joined together as a community of faith in relationship to Jesus Christ, our chief cornerstone.

Our congregation was formed in 1910. This 3rd building was built in 1941. That means that we have deep roots in Lubbock, based on the work of those who came before us.

But we have even deeper roots. We have roots that stretch back through our mother church, the Church of England. But those roots stretch even further back. We are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

So, if we are part of Christ's church, if we are God's spiritual house, how will we be building or rebuilding on the foundation that has been laid for us?

This is a good question for us to be asking. How will we build upon our foundations? What will we be about in mission and ministry in the future?

Such questions require deep spiritual discernment. Because it's not up to us to design the house. The plans for the church of Jesus Christ are not left up to us to draft. The blueprints of our spiritual house are not ours to determine.

That's because the house itself belongs to God. We are simply called to join with our fellow Christians to be part of God's design, as a community of faith. And as part of that structure, as part of that community of faith, we have an identity, and we have work to do. And today's epistle reading from 1Peter deals powerfully with those twin questions of who we are to be and what we are to do.

First Peter tells us what our identity is. Peter says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." Those are strange images for modern people: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Chosen race. I think the word "race" catches our eye these days, and it might trip us up. Instead, we need to focus on the other word. The operative word is "chosen." We are chosen, chosen by God to be his church, his people. This is not an ethnocentric or racist term. As Revelation says, God chooses his followers from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

But we are chosen. We are called by God to be part of his church. It's God's church, not ours. It's God's plan, not ours. We are chosen and invited to participate. But we're not in the driver's seat. God is. And if we lose sight of that reality, we're in trouble.

Royal Priesthood. The operative word here is priesthood. We're royal because we're called to be priests of the king of kings. But the central term is priesthood.

In Israel, only a select group of men of one family could be priests. And this small group of priests in Israel was set aside for a specific purpose. They were to be intermediaries. As priests they would stand between God and his people. They would offer worship and sacrifice up to God on behalf of the people. And they'd declare God's blessings upon his people on his behalf.

Yet in the Old Testament, over and over again, there also is a very real sense that the whole nation of Israel was called to be a priestly people. They were called to do for the world what their priests did for them. All the people of Israel were to be a priestly people, to do a priestly kind of ministry. They were to be intermediaries between God and the rest of the world.

So when Peter declares that the church is also to be a royal priesthood, he's saying that the function of the church is to be priestly. The church is to stand between God and the world. We are to serve the world in God's name. We are also called to bring the rest of the world into relationship with God.

That means that you have priestly ministry. Don't be fooled because I've got the collar and the stole. Yes, I am a priest. More specifically, I am an ordained priest, an ordained presbyter in Christ's one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. I do have a unique and special role to play in this community.

But I'm not the only priestly person here. All of us who are baptized are called to engage in priestly ministry. No, you won't be standing at the altar leading the celebration of the Eucharist. But you are called to be intermediaries between God and the world. After all, at the end of every baptismal service, it is ALL the people who say to the newly baptized, "Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

Holy nation. The operative word is holy. Holy means "set apart" or "distinct." Because we are God's chosen, priestly people, we're called to live in a different way from the rest of the world. If we're not distinct we won't do any good. But we are called to be distinct, to be light in the darkness, to be salt that gives flavor, to be yeast that changes the entire lump of dough.

There's a delicate balance here. If we're too distinct and separate from the rest of the culture, we won't be able to influence our culture because we'll be too isolated. But if we're too much like the culture, we'll blend in so much that there's nothing distinctive about us.

So we are called to be in the world, and part of the world. But we're called to be different enough from the world that we can have an influence on it. That's what being a holy people is all about

Peter says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." That's our identity.

Yet Peter doesn't stop there. He also tells us what our purpose is. Because we are a chosen and holy priesthood, we have a job to do.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The "in order that" is essential. It's not just about who we are to be. It's about what we are to do.

St. Paul's was not placed here to be a social club. Yes, fellowship with each other is important, but that's not the most important thing we do. St. Paul's was not placed here primarily to take care of the needs of its members. Yes, as a Christian community, we want to love each other and help each through difficult times. But that's not the most important thing we do.

Instead, Peter reminds us, we are called to proclaim God's mighty acts, to tell the story of Jesus Christ, to let the world know that what he has done for us has made a difference in our lives, and that it can make a difference in their lives. We are called to invite them to come and join us.

107 years ago in the early 20th century, St. Paul's had 16 charter members. We have grown because those members invited other people into the fellowship of our congregation. We have grown from that original group of 16 because God gives us such important work to do.

If St. Paul's is going to be a vibrant place in the 22nd century, then we have work to do now in the 21st century. Yes, I know that Episcopal Churches are shrinking all over the country. Yes, I know that mainline churches are shrinking as well. But we don't have to be a slave to national trends. We have our own ministry to do, here, in Lubbock, Texas, in the 21st Century.

We offer an ancient pattern of worship that is glorious and hard to match.

In a polarized world, we provide a place where all sorts of people with differing opinions can gather together to worship the living God.

I think we're the best-kept secret in Lubbock, Texas. But we're not going to grow by sitting here doing nothing. We have to step out of our comfort zones. We have to work to grow.

It is something we've been working hard on. It's the 2nd part of our mission statement: "Welcoming and growing in faith and fellowship."

The people of St. Paul's in 1910 worked hard. The people of St. Paul's in 1941 worked hard. And now, we the people of St. Paul's must do no less in 2017.

And we must do so, not because it's a good idea. We must do so, as the Blues Brothers would say, because "we're on a mission from God."

We've been called to serve as a royal priesthood, offering glorious worship. We've been called to be a holy people, forsaking darkness. We've been called to live as God's own people, as an example to the world.

In the 21st century, let us continue to proclaim to the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, who has called us to live in his marvelous light.