

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**  
**Grace and Holy Trinity Church**  
**Richmond, Virginia**  
**Easter V, May 14, 2017**

*1 Peter 2:2-10*

*Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:*

*“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner”, and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*

*But 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

*John 14:1-14*

*Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”*

*Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”*

My aunt, Angela Homme, died on May 5<sup>th</sup>. She was the oldest of three children and the last to go. Since my mother died almost ten years ago, it was my privilege to care for Angela. Angela was very sweet and undemanding throughout, for the most part.

Still, it could be a challenge, because she had dementia...which got progressively worse...so communication was difficult. I couldn’t rely on the usual or obvious ways of communication...but had to learn to read between the

lines...to try and discern what she was really saying or thinking. Plan A...direct communication didn't work, so I had to move to Plan B.

About three weeks ago I received a call from the facility where she lived saying she was doing poorly...had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. I went out to talk with her. When I arrived she told me, "They won't believe me!" I said, "Angela, I believe you...you aren't feeling well." She got very animated and a bit peeved at that point and said, "No! They won't believe me when I say, I am fine."

That was Angela, through the dementia, letting me know...as much as she had loved life...she wanted people to stop trying to fix her, to leave her alone,...she was ready to let go. She was really fine. And three weeks later, at the age of 92 ½, she died. Did I mention, she was also a very determined person?

I have just begun a book called "Plan B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy." It tells the story of a woman, Sheryl Sandberg. You may know her from her book, "Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead."

She was in a great marriage, with two children...I think they were just entering kindergarten and first grade when husband died very suddenly while they were on a dream vacation, and you can just imagine the devastation.

<Just weeks after losing (her husband) this woman was talking to her good friend Phil, about a father – child activity. They came up a plan for someone to fill in for her husband. She cried to Phil, 'But I want my husband.' Phil put his arm around her and said, "Option A is not available. So let's just kick the heck out of Option B. Life is never perfect. We all live with some form of Option B.

><sup>1</sup>

It is a good thing there is the possibility of Option or Plan B...you do know...that this world, as it currently operates...is not God's Plan A. You remember the overarching story of Scripture, a story summarized for us in every Eucharistic Prayer. As we recount the story we give thanks to God, for the goodness and love...made known to us in creation. We remember that it was from the primal elements God brought forth the human race and made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against God, betrayed God's trust, and we turned against one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Kindle Version, from the Introduction. The book is written by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, copyright 2017.

So...God moved to Plan B, he decided to draw straight with crooked lines. He raised up the people of Israel. Again and again God called us to return. Through prophets and sages God revealed his righteous law. And in the fullness of time God sent his only Son...to open for us the way to freedom and peace. We await and work for a glorious future, where sin and death will be no more and we believe there will be a new creation, and in the fullness of time, all things will be put in subjection under the Son, who died for us and who rose again. Alleluia!

God gets it done, in spite of everything that has been done, to try and stop him. It is this ability of God to work Plan B which is spoken of in I Peter this morning. Quoting Psalm 118, I Peter says, "To you then who believe, (Jesus Christ) is precious; ...."The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.'" Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the first part of the chapter says, "Welcome to the living Stone, the source of life. The workmen took one look and threw it out; God set it in the place of honor."

Humanity crucified the Lord of Glory, but God raised him from the dead. God almost seems to glory in working against the odds...the Scripture is full of such stories, from Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal to Jesus on Good Friday to the women at the tomb early on Easter morning.

So, I want to talk some about Plan B, and how it relates to us corporately as the church and in our individual lives as Christians. So, first, the church.

I Peter addresses the church as "aliens and exiles" and Christians were an insignificant minority in the Roman world. And, as you know, for a generation or so, Christianity has been in decline in the US. Let me clarify what I mean because there has been tremendous faithful work going on in the church...with liturgical renewal, race, women's equality, sexuality issues, poverty, spirituality...to name a few things.

But, the over all numbers of people in church has declined. Good work does not guarantee numbers. While we can always do better, the assumption it is simply our fault, is erroneous. There are cultural and demographic shifts happening over which no one congregation has control.

Church membership is not an assumption now, as it was, say in the 1950s. Cultural Christians are falling by the wayside, and we must choose to believe...even as we are becoming, culturally speaking, “aliens and exiles.” The church has done some of its best work when it had alien status. Certainly it does its best work when it is willing to change and to consider Plan B.

Back in the 1920s, Grace Church here in Richmond didn't like the trends it was seeing, and some conversations started with Holy Trinity Church and in 1924...Grace and Holy Trinity Church was created. The people of Grace Church left their building, and helped to create a new thing, with the support of their Rector, in a new place. And aren't we glad they were willing to be so radical and creative? Their building no longer survives but Grace Church is alive and well and is right here right now. You know the cornerstone just says “Holy Trinity”. Maybe we should change that in 2024 to celebrate 100 years.

I heard another interesting church story recently at the Bishop's Spring Conference at Shrine Mont. Rachel Held Evans, the keynote speaker, told the story of this aging Methodist congregation. The church building had been there many years, and the city had changed around it, drastically. They had fewer and fewer members. So they started renting their space to help pay the bills. One group was a congregation of Ethiopian exiles.

So the aging congregation met upstairs in the sanctuary and the Ethiopians were downstairs. The upstairs congregation continued to dwindle, but downstairs...things were lively and growing. Down the way, the original congregation said “You all come on up here, and eventually, they gave the entire building along with, I think, some trust funds for its maintenance, to the new congregation. Plan B! God finds a way when there seems to be no way.

If we worship the past or the way we want things to be, then we will die. But when we focus solely on God...when we open ourselves to God's creative spirit, amazing changes happen. When we are at low ebb, when we feel stressed, God is at high power. Maybe it is because our arrogance can't get in the way.

I am betting on the future of this church. I don't know what it will look like, but I have a place in the columbarium and will have a ring side seat!

And let me also add, this is not just about the church, the Body of Christ, this is also about every individual member of it. And Jesus said in the Gospel today, “Do not let your hearts be troubled...trust in me...there are many dwelling places in God’s house and there is a place for all.”

So in your personal life...when things are not how you wanted, wished or prayed for them to be, just remember we all live with some form of Option B and God can help you find your way to it.

\*Whether the challenge is with children you love or children you have lost.

\*With your spouse, your friends, your co-workers or with some group.

\*Whether even the division is within in you...as it is for instance where alcoholism and addiction is concerned...there is this beast within that says, “You can’t live without me. You will die without your drink or your drug.” God opens plan B...that voice is not you, that voice is the agent of death...God can help you find life.

With prayer and blood, sweat, tears, and toil, you can hold on to God and God can lead you to the light. Every time you fall, get up again...try again.

As the spiritual has it:

Oh, God will make a way

Where there seems to be no way

He works in ways we cannot see

He will make a way for me

He will be my guide

Hold me closely to His side

With love and strength for each new day

He will make a way, He will make a way<sup>2</sup>

For those who believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner.” Never give up. Look for God and God’s Plan B...embrace the change. This is good news for us all. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Don Moen - God Will Make A Way Lyrics | MetroLyrics

