

*You will find the 2019 Lifewatch Sermon is excellent material for small-group study in a local church. Therefore, it is offered here as an insert, in the March 1, 2019 (Early Edition) issue of Lifewatch, so that it might be copied, distributed, read, studied, and discussed in a small group. The Lifewatch community is profoundly grateful to Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker for writing and preaching this sermon. (PTS)*

**2019 LIFEWATCH SERMON:  
“LIVING AS THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH”  
by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker**

*“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.”  
—I Peter 2:9-10 (NRSV)*

**Introduction: the church at the March for Life**

Tens of thousands have gathered here in the nation’s capital today for the annual March for Life. This march is more than a protest against destroying the lives of unborn children. It is a festival for celebrating the gift of life and for remembering that every human being who is conceived is irreplaceable and deserves protection by the state and care from his or her community.

Not everyone who participates in this march is a member of the church. Anyone who knows that life begins with conception and who, for whatever reason, has reverence for life shares the purpose of this march. Nevertheless, many who are here are members of the church.

Being a member of the church entails confessing certain beliefs and practicing certain behaviors, which explains Christians’ revulsion against abortion and our public witness for life. Unless a part of the church is compromised by being conformed to the world, becoming a Christian profoundly changes one’s perception of reality and one’s behavior. Indeed, what makes the church stand out is that it defines itself as something different from the rest of the world, and that is why the church is loved by many as well as hated by many.

Since this march shows us again the strangely appealing and exciting fact that being a member of the church entails walking in a way that is out of step with the world, this is a good occasion to remember what the church is.

**The Apostolic definition of the church**

The single most important statement in the New Testament about what the church is is I Peter 2:9-10.

I Peter 2:9-10 is an eloquent, theologically thick statement. It is always a little surprising to me to encounter such sophisticated writing in the early church. I tend to forget that in the early church there were brilliant thinkers and scribes whose names we do not know who helped the apostles and their associates to formulate the teaching of the church. Apparently, I Peter is written to people who have just been baptized, and so Silvanus is probably drawing on traditions of teaching candidates for baptism as he composes this letter under Peter’s authority. So then, what is written about the church is probably the product of the work of many teachers over a period of years as well as the thinking of Peter and the artistry of Silvanus.

I Peter 2:9-10 states, “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.”

This statement is important because it represents a consensus among the earliest Christians about the identity of the church. The First Epistle of Peter is the most ecumenical writing in the New Testament. I say that I Peter is “ecumenical” because it gathers together particular emphases of different parts of the earliest church. [1] In this epistle you have echoes of the teaching of the mother church in Jerusalem, the message of Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, and the testimony of John the disciple of the Lord. It is no surprise that this epistle gathers up the ideas of various parts of the church since it was written under the authority of Peter by Silvanus, a co-worker of Paul, to churches of Asia Minor where the influence of John was strong. Since I Peter is the most ecumenical of all the writings of the New Testament, we can be confident that its teaching about the identity of the church expresses the broad consensus of all the apostles and early Christian leaders and teachers.

**The church as Israel**

If you are a student of the scriptures, then you are struck by how I Peter describes the church as being Israel. This whole statement is a summary of texts from the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament that describe Israel. The texts are from Exodus and from the writings of the prophets Malachi, Isaiah, and Hosea.

The main text is Exodus 19:5-6. When the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt, the LORD instructed Moses to say to them: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

When the apostles spoke the word “church,” they meant “Israel.” The story of Israel told in the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament has become the story of the church. God calls the church into existence to be Israel reconstituted around Jesus the Messiah, Lord, and Son of God and to include Gentiles as well as Jews. The apostles first learned that the church is Israel from Jesus himself. When Jesus proclaimed the coming of “the kingdom of God,” his hearers understood that he was promising the reconstitution of Israel around himself because a kingdom requires a people. [2]

This does not mean that faithful Jews who observe the law of God are not still Israel. Jews are Christians’ older brothers and sisters who were Israel before we were Israel. [3] We have been made a part of Israel by God through the crucified and risen Jesus whom God revealed to be the Messiah of Israel, the Lord of the world, and God’s own Son. As Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck has said, the biblical vision of the church is that of “the messianic pilgrim people of God typologically shaped by Israel’s story.” [4]

### **The church is not the “religion of the culture”**

The biblical vision of the church as also being Israel has enormous implications for our understanding today of the identity of the church.

There is tremendous confusion today about the church’s identity. Many people assume that the church is just a part of human society and that its role is to express the highest ideals and values of a society and its culture. To coin a phrase, many people assume that the church is just the “religion of the culture.” If this is so, then naturally the church should conform to the culture as the ideals and values of the culture change.

But the church is not the “religion of the culture.” The church may take on the external form of a religion in any culture, but its identity does not come from the culture but from God. God instituted the church by Jesus Christ and constitutes the church by the Holy Spirit to be a distinctive community within any and every society and culture. The church’s identity is distinctive because God created the church to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” The church is not the possession of any race or nation or cultural establishment. No, the church is *God’s own people*.

The church is “a chosen race.” That means that the church is not a natural phenomenon that is simply a part of biological and social evolution. The church is a special creation of God in history to be a particular people whom God has elected to be different from everyone else. The church is “a royal priesthood.” That means that the church is called to perform a liturgy of praising God the King of creation, on behalf of all other peoples and all of creation. The church is “a holy nation.” That means that the church is set apart from all other peoples, and it is set apart from other peoples not only by its distinctive liturgy but also by its distinctive life. The church is “God’s own people.” The church belongs only to God because of his mighty deeds of mercy in offering his own Son to purchase the church by his blood and in sending the Spirit to illumine, guide, and empower the church’s life.

Now, I suspect that you may be thinking that these words about the church in I Peter are just idealistic statements or even just pretty decorations.

Even though these words about the church are lofty and beautifully written, do not make the mistake of thinking that they are not to be taken realistically. When the apostles taught that the church is Israel and that it is a very distinctive people who are called to live an alternative way of life in the world, they were not playing games with words. In the apostolic era, whenever anyone was baptized, then he or she was expected to make a radical commitment to believe and to behave as a member of “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” and “God’s own people.”

### **The primitive church as “the once and future church” which lived the apostolic definition of the church**

Furthermore, it is important to know that the church faithfully lived out this apostolic vision of the church during the first three hundred years of its history. It did not live out this vision perfectly, of course, but the best historical evidence is that during the era of primitive Christianity the church stood out from the rest of the world and was faithful to its calling even in the midst of persecution and to the point of martyrdom. Along with others, I call the primitive church of the first three hundred years “the once and future church” because the kind of church that once existed in the beginning is the church that God will re-create in the future following the long era of Christendom. [5]

The church changed during the era of Christendom because in the fourth century the church began to play the role of the “religion of the culture.” The collapse of Christendom after seventeen centuries is creating a crisis for the church. The church is highly anxious because it no longer knows what it is since it can no longer play the role of the “religion of the culture.” Well, the primitive church proves that the church’s real identity is not to be the “religion of the culture,” but its identity is to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” and “God’s own people.” So then, during this time of high anxiety and confusion about the

identity of the church, we can look to the primitive church of the first three hundred years as the paradigm, the template, the model for the church of the future.

The anxiety about the identity of the church runs very high among us United Methodists. There is a lot of talk in The United Methodist Church today about finding “a way forward.” While this talk about “a way forward” is precipitated by strong disagreements about United Methodist discipline concerning human sexuality, at a deeper level it reflects our anxiety about what it means to be the church when the church has been rejected by society from its role as the “religion of the culture.” Many United Methodists act as if they are desperate to hold on to that role of the “religion of the culture,” and they urge the church to adapt to the society around us so that we might reflect the ideals and values of the culture. I would submit that the way forward for any Christian communion is the way set forth in I Peter. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” There is no way forward for any organization that claims to be a part of the church unless it is continuous with the proclamation and tradition of the apostles, and the primitive church of the first three hundred years shows us that it is realistic to think that the church can indeed live out the apostolic vision of the church.

### **Doctrine and discipline as the inseparable marks of the church from the beginning**

The church has always needed two things in order to live out the apostolic vision of the church. From the very beginning, the church has been characterized by the two D’s -- doctrine and discipline. The two D’s stand for the church’s truth and its way of living, its profession of faith and its practice of faith, its belief and its behavior. The two D’s cannot be separated because God’s revelation of God’s character and purposes also entails God’s revelation for how God’s people believe and behave.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth reminded us that the covenant of grace which God has made with humankind through Jesus Christ always includes God’s commandments for humankind. Barth says, “As God is gracious to us in Jesus Christ, His command is the claim which, when it is made, has power over us, demanding that in all we do we admit that what God does is right, and requiring that we give our free obedience to this demand.” [6]

God’s revelation to us is not only God giving us knowledge about who God is, but it is also God disclosing God’s purposes for us and God’s direction for our lives. That is why, when we read the scriptures, we find much more than information about God’s name and nature; we also encounter God’s promises, commands, warnings, and laws for us. [7] Jesus is the supreme revelation of God in history, and when we look at Jesus’ ministry, we see that he not only tells us about his Father, but he also teaches us with authority how to live.

The apostles are God’s chosen witnesses to divine revelation. The apostolic tradition includes both doctrine and discipline. We are not free to say that, on the one hand, we accept the doctrine that comes from the apostles, but, on the other hand, we reject the discipline that comes from them. Doctrine and discipline belong together because the truth that has been revealed to us is always also a way of life.

It is also a profound error to think that God’s people in one place and time, or in one cultural context, may have a different doctrine and discipline from God’s people in another place and time. Throughout the history of the church, the doctrine and discipline of the church have always been transcultural. Of course, the way we communicate the meaning of the gospel has to fit the cultural context, but this does not mean that we let the cultural context change the gospel itself. And lest we forget, as Joseph Small has said, “The gospel is not about what we think, but how we live....The animating thrust of Scripture is to display how faith acts, urging us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called (Eph. 4:1).” [8]

How do we know what the true discipline of the church is? A reliable guide is the primitive church because the church of the first three hundred years was close to the apostles themselves, and it understood the apostles’ teaching and the clear implications of their teaching. A scholar of early Christianity, Michael J. Gorman, urges us to “go ahead to our past” and learn from the primitive church because the primitive church was “a church with a moral vision and character that may well be needed in the contemporary church.” He says that the moral vision of the primitive church included the virtues of “holiness in sexual matters,” “horror of bloodshed,” “‘humanization’ of non-persons,” and “compassionate help to the needy.” [9] Because of these virtues, he says, “the early church was, indeed, a vocal opponent of abortion.” [10] Anyone who doubts that, from the beginning, the church was outspoken in its opposition to abortion should read the writings of the *Didache*, *The Instruction of the Twelve Apostles*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, Tertullian, and Origen. For example, the *Didache*, which the primitive church believed represents the meaning of the apostles’ teaching, states bluntly that “you shall not murder a child by abortion, nor kill that which is begotten.” [11]

When we today make the apostolic and primitive church the model for the church of the future, then we shall discover the same thing that the first Christians discovered, namely that there are people who are powerfully attracted to the church when the church offers them an alternative way of living in the world. When you are surrounded by a culture that is ignorant of spiritual realities, that is obsessed with physical pleasure and ease, and that celebrates self-centeredness -- the world of the “selfie” -- the church that speaks a

different language and embraces a completely different way of life is a place of liberation and hope for those aspiring to live a more noble existence. Certainly, the world needs this kind of church as persons' lives are being ruined and the culture is being degraded by the sexual revolution, which includes an affirmation of the moral horror of abortion. In a world that is deceived by the devil's cheap promises of self-fulfillment as the highest value in life, the church must run counter to culture rather than cozy up to culture.

### **The purpose of living as God's own people**

The purpose of living as God's people -- a people who know the truth, the way, and the life according to the doctrine and discipline of the church -- is communion with the living God. God invites everyone of every class, race, and nation in every generation to be a part of God's own people so that together we may be in communion with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

None of us is worthy to be a part of God's people, for each of us in our own way misuses the freedom God gives us and fails to live according to God's will. It is only by the grace of God that any of us may become a member of God's people.

It is by the grace of God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit that we are all invited to be a part of God's own people by repenting of our sins, believing the gospel, and being baptized. It is by grace that we may live in communion with God daily by being in the world but not of the world. It is by grace that we may be forgiven and restored to communion with God when we who have been baptized lose heart and conform to the world around us. And it is by grace that we look forward to perfect and eternal communion with God in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

We give thanks for the grace of God that creates, sustains, and consummates the life of the church. In the words of Samuel J. Stone's hymn, "The Church's One Foundation:" "Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;/her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;/one holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,/and to one hope she presses, with every grace endued."

### **Conclusion: The church's witness for life today**

That brings us back here to Washington, DC and the March for Life, and why it is that so many members of the church are present.

As we join other members of the church who gather today for the March for Life, what we are doing is -- in the words of I Peter -- proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. We are carrying on the work which the church has been doing from the very beginning. We do so because the light of God's revelation shows us that God is the source of life of all humankind and that God wills that everyone come to know the fullness of life which God intends, including the unborn.

Let us continue to make our witness of light and life to the world, and let us pray for the universal church of Jesus Christ today, that every part of the church may be, indeed, "a chosen race," "a royal priesthood," "a holy nation," and "God's own people."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[1] In the essay, "Scripture's Pope Meets von Balthasar's Peter," Markus Bockmuehl observes, "The first letter of Peter is widely acknowledged as bringing together an almost unparalleled range of early Christian traditions." Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado, Editors, *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), p. 336.

[2] Dale C. Allison, Jr. says, "A kingdom is empty and so nothing without its subjects..." and then he cites Exodus 19:6, noting how well known it was as attested in Jesus' era at Qumran and in Revelation 1:6, 5:10. See Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 207.

[3] My language about a "part of Israel" is derived from Romans 11:24 (NRSV).

[4] George Lindbeck, "The Church," Geoffrey Wainwright, Editor, *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 179.

[5] The term, "the once and future church" may have been first popularized by Loren B. Mead in *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (The Alban Institute, 1991). Bishop Scott Jones used this term as the title of his 2010 Lifewatch Sermon.

[6] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Volume II, Part 2 (London: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 552. See the entire discussion of the relation of theology and ethics, pp. 509-781.

[7] Kevin J. Vanhoozer affirms Barth's understanding of revelation, but he also expands its meaning to make clear that revelation entails concrete divine directions for living. He writes, "Divine communicative action is a Trinitarian event, but (*contra* Barth) this does not mean that God communicates only himself. In short, God is doing more in Scripture than simply 'revealing.' God's communicative acts include both deed-words like the cross and speech-acts like the canon. And with regard to the latter, divine discourse includes promises, commands, warnings, laws, and so forth. This is a key insight for rethinking the Scripture principle in a way that preserves Barth's basic insight yet at the same time goes beyond it." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 66.

[8] Joseph D. Small, "Internal Injuries: Moral Division within the Churches," Michael Root and James J. Buckley, Editors, *The Morally Divided Body: Ethical Disagreements and the Disunity of the Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), p. 48.

[9] Michael J. Gorman, "Ahead to Our Past: Abortion and Christian Texts," Paul T. Stallworth, General Editor, *The Church and Abortion: In Search of New Ground for Response* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 37.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[11] "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," Chapter II, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Volume VII (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1985), p. 377.

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