

Look to the Rock

Isaiah 51:1-6; Matthew 16:13-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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August 23, 2026/Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

It's been a while! Naomi and I recently returned from a nice holiday away in BC (minus the smoke of the Okanagan). But eventually we made our way further west and enjoyed some time paddling and hiking and resting on the Sunshine Coast.

I hope summer has been treating you well, too.

I want to begin by saying a big “thank you” to Henry Janzen and Jen for their sermons over the last two Sundays.

Henry invited us to reflect upon the nature and scope of salvation and gave us an expansive vision of God's rescuing work.

Jen had us reflecting on Artificial Intelligence through the lens of the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel and Pope Leo's recent encyclical.

Two massive topics, both handled very well! It is a gift to have good minds in our church community and its orbit to help us think Christianly about these things (and to live faithfully!).

This morning, my sermon is kind of going to be in the vicinity of the themes from both of our previous two Sundays.

1. The digital context in which we seek to live faithfully
2. The saving work of God in Jesus Christ.

Let's start with the digital context.

I have been a pastor for nearly two decades now—my first steps in ministry took place when I was an associate pastor in Nanaimo in 2008.

In 2007, Apple released the iPhone. Between 2010-12, social media apps like Facebook and Instagram were either launching or becoming more entrenched in everyone's lives.

So, for the entirety of my pastoral career, the rise of the smartphone, the proliferation of social media, and just online life in general with all of its various incentives and algorithms have provided the shaping context in which I and those I seek to minister to live and move and have our being.

And this shaping context exerts a powerful influence on us all, particularly on the young. It's not always a good one.

I am old enough to remember breathless optimism of the early days of the internet and social media. It was going to democratize access to information, it was going to make us better informed. Social media was going to bring us all together.

There was a great deal of excitement. These new technologies were going to be a unifying force for good in our world.

This seems laughable twenty years later. Yes, there are always things here or there that we could point to about how social media has had positive effects or led people to reconnect or discover supportive communities. Or find good deals on stuff we want. :)

But in very broad strokes, what we have seen over the last two decades is a grim list:

- the obliteration of attention spans (twenty years ago, people complained that the internet was leading to fewer people reading books; I now hear complaints that nobody can even make it through a two hour movie without having their phone nearby to scroll while watching)
- skyrocketing rates of depression and anxiety and addictions of all kinds—indeed, addiction is the business model of the internet age. Social media is deliberately designed to keep our attention, to keep us constantly clicking, scrolling
- weakening commitments to institutions of all kinds
- an explosion of shallow and vulgar forms of entertainment
- a rise in deeply divisive and polarizing public discourse

We also see despair. We see people adrift, struggling with meaninglessness and isolation and loneliness.

We see people lacking a coherent vision of either the past or the future within which to anchor their lives, lacking a compelling a hope to guide their action in the present.

Now, social media and the online world more generally is not the *only* factor in any of the above outcomes. But it has played a massive role.

And there's starting to be a bit of push back. As of this week, a major trial involving Meta has begun in California, with several states alleging that Facebook and Instagram were deliberately designed in ways that could harm children and that Meta improperly collected data from children under 13.

In March 2026, a Los Angeles jury found Meta and YouTube liable in a case brought on behalf of a young person who alleged that the companies' platform designs contributed to serious mental-health problems.

(Ironically, in the article where I read about this, there was a photo of parents taking selfies of themselves celebrating the verdict outside the court.)

Schools are increasingly banning phones from classrooms. Australia recently enacted restrictions designed to prevent anyone under 16 from joining social media (Canada is contemplating doing the same).

There is a growing recognition that the last twenty years have not been particularly good for us, especially the young. We are being malformed in important ways.

The shaping context of the last two decades has not been conducive to human flourishing.

We are being conditioned to treat our selves as products to market to other people online. In this shaping context, human lives easily and naturally become conceived as commodities whose value is gauged by the amount of online traffic and engagement they generate.

We increasingly seem to feel like we have to create selves worthy of being seen online, whether it's in the photos we post, the stories we share, the politics we affirm (or criticize), the things we buy, the brands we associate ourselves with, etc.

And this unending project of self-creation and self-projection is proving a heavy burden for many people.

Who am I if I don't generate much interest online? If nobody likes or shares what I post? If I get passed by on the dating apps? If my story doesn't seem very remarkable? If I'm not crushing my fitness goals or dieting goals or professional goals or romantic goals or any other goals, and broadcasting these for others to notice and affirm?

Where does my value come from?

In an online world, value comes only from what generates attention and engagement. Something doesn't have to be virtuous or admirable or productive in any way, it only has to generate clicks and scrolls.

I think our souls become malformed when we apply these incentives to how we think about ourselves and our stories.

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I spent a lot of time this week pondering a single line from the first verse of our Old Testament reading today:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug.

As we know from earlier this summer in our series on creation where we had an Isaiah reading every Sunday, this is a book written to exiles. To people who have been forcibly removed from their land and everything that gave solidity to their story.

It is a book written to people experiencing dislocation and disorientation, physically, emotionally, spiritually. A people who are struggling to understand and interpret their experience.

What is going on? Why is this happening? What is God trying to tell us? Who are we now that we are away from all that was familiar?

To these people, Isaiah says, “look to the rock from which you were hewn.” Remember who you are. Remember your story. Remember that you are part of a community brought into being, held and sustained by God.

Look back to Abraham, to Sarah, remember that you are part of a family, a community, something bigger than yourselves and this moment.

Lift up your eyes. Look to God and the story God is telling.

Our passage from Isaiah says many things to its first listeners and to us. It offers words of comfort (“he will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD), deliverance, salvation. Words of promise and power.

But I am drawn to this simple call: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn.”

The word “hewn” is not one we often use, but it refers to something that is cut, chopped, or carved out of wood or stone.

In biblical or literary language, “hewn” often emphasizes something carefully crafted or cut from a larger whole.

We always hear the words of Scripture from our own contexts (obviously), and given the shaping context that I spent the first part of my sermon talking about, I cannot help but think that this passage is also simply an invitation to look somewhere besides *ourselves* to find meaning, value, purpose in our lives.

“Look to the rock” is a reminder that every human life has a value beyond the paltry metrics of the digital world. Our lives may seem easy to overlook, unimpressive, not terribly marketable by the punishing standards of the digital world, but these are not the standards that matter.

“Look to the rock” is a reminder that our lives are not products to sell or data to be mined by massive corporations, but precious stories, opportunities to encounter and reflect the good, the true, and the beautiful, to give and receive grace—stories that find their place in a much bigger story than our own.

“Look to the rock” is a reminder that we are part of a story of which we are not the author, a story that goes back to Abraham and Sarah, even back to creation itself, a story where we have a role to play but we are not the heroes of. God is.

I was talking over this sermon with Naomi yesterday while we drove out to Waterton to go on a hike. She was kind of nodding along and then she asked one of those inconvenient questions that she is so good at asking.

“And so,” she said, “what does this mean practically? How does this make a difference in our everyday lives?”

I had to think about this for a while. Partly, it seems obvious to me. We need to have better ways of thinking about ourselves and our world and about God if we are going to live well in the world.

But in really concrete terms? How does this matter?

Well, a few things came to mind. I think if we can resist our shaping context and resist the temptation to think of our lives as products to slot into the digital machine, we might be:

1. Less restless (restlessness is in many ways the defining disposition of our time... we’re always scrolling, clicking ahead to the next thing)
2. Have a deeper and more settled sense of peace with ourselves (we do not have to chase online status or recognition or acknowledgement—we know who we are and we know whose we are)
3. Be less anxious about the future (“God’ salvation will endure forever”)
4. Have a greater capacity for gratitude and joy

The stories we tell ourselves about who we are matter. The stories we tell ourselves about who God is matter.

It’s so easy to get pulled into lesser stories that give us false visions of both of these things.

We need to look to the rock from which we were hewn to reorient, recalibrate, remind ourselves of the hope to which we are called and to the God who is always calling us.

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Speaking of the God who is always calling us. Our gospel text today contains Jesus' famous question for his disciples.

Who do you say that I am?

That is a question that has resounded down through the ages.

Simon responds, famously, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus affirms this answer as one that only God could have revealed. He changes Simon's name to "Peter," which in Greek means "rock" or "stone." He promises that on this "rock" and this proclamation, his church will be built.

Jesus' question is one asked of us, too. Who do we say that Jesus is?

A good teacher who said some cool things about love and peace once upon a time?
Or the author and perfecter of our faith?

A source manual for our ethics and our politics or the lover of our souls and the saviour of the world?

An accessory to the stories we are creating for ourselves? Or the very foundation?

Our texts this morning invite us to look backward and forward.

Look back, to the rock from which we were cut, to the God and to the story which has formed us, given us a narrative to live out of and to live into, which tells us who we are and whose we are. Which imbues our lives with a significance and a meaning that we don't to have to create and curate ourselves.

Look forward to the rock of our Salvation. Look to the cornerstone, the one who holds out a promise for a future we can never secure for ourselves.

This week I of course couldn't help but think of all of these things in the context of Virleen Unruh's last few days this side of eternity.

There is something holy and precious about watching one chapter of a human story come to a close.

But as I stood in her hospital room, knowing death was not far away, I was once again reminded that in the end there is only God.

All of the things that we scramble after—money, status, recognition, affirmation, validations attention, legitimacy, approval, value... these all fade away.

All the cruel and unworthy digital metrics that claim to tell the story of a human life also fade away (thanks be to God).

All of the good we have done, all the good we have left undone, all the ways in which we have lived fully human lives to the glory of God, all the ways in which we have settled for smaller stories... all of it recedes into the background.

All that is left is the rock. The only One who can gather up our stories in all their contradictions and complexity and welcome them into the story of Eternity.

So, today, look to the rock from which you were hewn. Look to the one who has carefully crafted you and placed you in a story larger than yourself.

And look to the Rock of your salvation.

Look to the God who tells you the truth about who you are, about who God is, and about the hope to which you are called.

Look to the Rock.

Amen.

