

Cornerstones and Stumbling Stones

This is a sermon about stones.
But really, it is a sermon about identity.
Cornerstones and stumbling stones.

The Bible is full of stories with stones in them, which is well and good, because is there an image that stands the test of time better than stones? Not only do we encounter and use stones in the same ways as people in biblical times, for the most part they are the *same stones!*

Architecturally, the cornerstone still resonates: The stone set at the corner of two intersecting walls, crafted and chosen for its exact 90 degree angle, and the basis for the construction of the whole building.
And the stumbling stone? Is there any more universal human experience than tripping over a rock that you didn't see?
And the thing you say immediately afterward?

The apostle Peter, writer of this letter (whose name, it should not be lost on us, translates to "rock"), uses a torrent of Old Testament imagery in this passage (a rockslide of images if you will).
And yet Peter writes this letter to a persecuted, primarily *Gentile* audience in modern-day Turkey.

Why?

Because the story and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures is theirs now too. Through Jesus they have been invited into the ancient story, to utilize its wisdom and inspiration to make meaning out of their own lives.

As our text concludes:
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.*

The allusion here is to the prophet Hosea, who famously and scandalously married a prostitute just to illustrate that the unfaithfulness that would ensue reflected the ways in which Israel was treating God.

To drive his point home, in a move of questionable parenting, Hosea named his children “lo-ruhamah” and “lo-ammi,” which respectively mean, “shown no mercy” and “not my people.”

Hosea had pronounced judgment on Israel, but also anticipated a reversal, when his children would be renamed Ruhamah and Ammi, “shown mercy,” and “my people.”

Borrowing these categories, Peter celebrates the saving mercy of God and gives his audience their identity as God's people.

*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.*

Peter is not just re-quoting Old Testament texts, he's also breathing new life into old metaphors based on his transformative experience with Jesus.

Stones were significant in a very literal way to the Hebrew people. For years and years they cried out to God in captivity in Egypt, carrying the burden of constructing houses and temples for the Egyptian ruling class, while having no house of worship of their own.

In their journey to the promised land they developed a mobile home of sorts for God, a tabernacle, or tent that could be set up in the middle of camp and packed up whenever they needed to move again.

David wanted badly to build God a permanent house when he established his kingdom, but God told him that he had too much blood on his hands and that responsibility was to fall to his son, Solomon.

The book of 1 Kings takes three chapters to describe the building of this temple:

“Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hills...At the king’s command they removed from the quarry large blocks of high-grade stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple. The craftsmen of Solomon and Hiram and workers from Byblos cut and prepared the timber and stone for the building of the temple.”

After the Babylonians destroyed Solomon’s temple, King Herod rebuilt it to the size of almost 170,000 square feet, over 25 football fields in size.

It was the residence of God, the crowning jewel of Jerusalem to which pilgrimages were made, and an impressive sight to behold by any standard of the ancient world.

The stones mattered, which is why Jesus’ prophesy that not one stone of the temple would be left upon another was not just unpatriotic, but also sacreligious.

The temple would be destroyed, about 50 years after Jesus prophesied, this time for good, and Israel was forced to consider what their faith was centered around, if not the stones of the temple.

The faith would become less centered around Jerusalem and more focused
around local synagogues.

For Christ followers, the imagery of stones took on a spiritual dimension.
Isaiah's words about cornerstones and stumbling stones took on new meaning
in Jesus.

God would be realized everywhere and anywhere through the person of
Jesus. He would be the cornerstone they could center their lives on, and to
those who built their spiritual houses based on their own selfish agendas,
they would find the Jesus way to be a hindrance and barrier, tripping up their
manipulations and conceits.

Peter rolls on with the OT images that used to represent barriers to faith for
the Gentiles:

*“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.”*

Chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation
Do you feel out of place and rejected, so did Jesus
*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.*

You like Jesus, are a living stone
You like Jesus are chosen
You, like Jesus are honored and celebrated and given a purpose in the
Kindom work.

First Mennonite, do you find the identity of living stones to be liberating?

We can shake our heads about “temple obsession” but are we any less attached to our buildings?

I had a conversation a while ago in which the question was asked, “If this building closed its doors tomorrow for good and we had to permanently meet somewhere else, how much of First Mennonite would continue to be a regular part of this congregation?”

Joy Strome writes that Christianity today has become an increasingly alienating pursuit.

“Can one claim to be Christian, but not one of those Christians? Can one claim to be a follower of Christ, without conjuring up the online jokes and stereotypes plaguing anyone associated with organized religion? What kinds of resources are given to believers today so that they can withstand the onslaught of cultural disdain for Christianity? How can longing for spiritual milk, living stones, and the designation of royal priesthoods be any help?”

There are a lot of reasons to walk away from this mess the church has made. But to claim the identity of living stones may give us a helpful orientation and a reason to stay.

My sense is that if this building, which has deep identity ties for many of you, became unavailable tomorrow, the transition would be painful and difficult, but that most people here deep down identify with the living stones that make up this church.

We, the living stones, serve as the medium for communicating God’s transforming presence.

Strome concludes:

“For today our role is clear and we are compelled to act. God’s own people are empowered through Christ to sing, protest, dance, pray, and march. No stereotype can define us, because we have been claimed by God. No ridicule can undo us, because we have been named by God. No shallow expression of faith can represent us. We make our way into Ordinary time with the most extraordinary claim: Christ is risen! Risen indeed: It is enough to sustain us, it is enough to support us. It is enough to empower us for the days ahead.

Alleluia! Amen