

SERMON

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Rocks and Stones

May 21, 2017

Acts 7:55-60. 1 Peter 2:4-10. Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

ROCKS AND STONES.

There is a wonderful children's picture book by Byrd Baylor from Arizona called *"Everybody Needs a Rock."* It begins:

"Everybody needs a rock. I'm sorry for kids who don't have a rock for a friend. I'm sorry for kids who only have tricycles, bicycles, horses, elephants, goldfish, three-room playhouses, fire engines, wind up dragons and things like that – if they don't have a rock for a friend."

Baylor goes on in her book to describe 10 rules to consider when selecting a rock as a friend. It made me think about all the various qualities of a rock. These are a few that I've come up with - think about them with me:

Strong; solid; can withstand a lot of weight; permanent; come in all shapes and sizes; sparkle in the sunlight; able to stand up to all kinds of weather; may be small enough to always carry with you; used to create beautiful sculptures; used to conquer giants; may be a dangerous weapon – the list could go on. There are so many ways to describe a rock – and so many uses for a rock.

Our scriptures are like that today. We hear three scriptures about the power of rocks and stones, and each one can teach us something about our faith as Christians.

ROCKS AND STONES.

To begin with, in Acts, we hear the story of stones being used to cause humiliation, hurt, pain, and eventually the death of Stephen. It is the story of the reaction, and the actions, of an angry group of on lookers. Stephen does not have a well-structured trial, followed by a traditional Jewish execution. No, Stephen is faced with an angry mob; we are told in verse 57 that they are:

"yelling at the top of their voices .. rush at him ..and drag him out of the city" (Acts 7: 57-58)

They do not want to hear Stephen's blasphemous claim that Jesus is the son of God, so they *"covered their ears"* (v57). They are furious with him. Then, one by one they pick up the stones laying on the ground around them and begin to hurl them at Stephen. Everyone that is gathered joins in – they even take their cloaks off and throw them on the ground so that they have more ease of movement. We don't know how big the mob was, we don't know how many stones it took, but we do know the end result - eventually Stephen was killed with perhaps a fatal blow as a stone hit his head.

It's a gruesome and bloody scene for us to imagine in the 21st century, but sadly stoning is still not illegal in 8 countries around the world, and any recorded victims of stoning today are almost always women. Here, in our North America we do not hear of people stoning and lynching others – but perhaps today in North America, we are still just as guilty of throwing another kind of stone – the stone of silence – the stone of inaction. When we hear comments or remarks, or witness actions that are contrary to life that God intends for us, contrary to the Kingdom of God on earth - do we speak up, or do we throw a stone of silence? When we hear racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes – do we just stand silent like the bystanders in front of Stephen – because if we do, perhaps we are just as guilty of using stones as weapons.

Or perhaps you identify with Stephen in this story. Perhaps you have been in the situation where stones of insults have been hurled at you because of your faith, because of the way in which you DID stand up against injustice or inequality. Perhaps you have been hurt by stone – and if that is the case, then be assured, like Stephen, that God is with you through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

ROCKS AND STONES

In our second reading, in Peter's letter, we hear about a "living stones". We have already heard Jesus referred to as 'living water', or 'living bread', or 'living way.' Now, we hear a stone as a metaphor for Jesus. Verse 4 says:

"The living stone – rejected by men but chosen by God" (1 Peter 2:4)

Peter is clearly referring to Jesus, who was chosen by God, but rejected by humankind. Peter's letter makes a direct reference to the Hebrew scriptures about Jesus' role as a stone; he quotes from Isaiah 28, writing:

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone" (1 Peter 2:6)

Now if, like me, you are not a builder and you don't have much or any experience in construction, then you might need to do some research about the importance of a cornerstone. Wikipedia describes the qualities of a cornerstone as:

"the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation; important since all other stones will be set in reference to it; it determines the position of the entire structure ... it is essential and indispensable."

Clearly the cornerstone needs to be strong, to be able to withhold weight, to stand up to all types of weather – just like all the qualities that I used to describe a rock. It wouldn't be any good for a builder to make the cornerstone out of sand – as we can tell from the Children's song about the wise and foolish builders. The corner stone is the strongest part of a foundation of a building – perhaps that is why builder choose it to carve inscriptions into it that say the date and purpose of the building.

It's not difficult to see how a cornerstone is a metaphor for our faith. We are called to make Jesus the cornerstone on which we build our faith in God. Jesus, is our foundation. And when we make Jesus our cornerstone, His love and grace becomes the center of everything we do. And the good news is that as the cornerstone, Jesus is able to withstand all the storms and burdens that we may throw His way. Even when we stumble and fall because of the "me" focused trappings of this world, God's love for us will not be crushed under the weight of our concerns and worries. Like a strong rock, God will remain firm, permanent, solid, strong and dependable. What a reassuring promise.

It is because of God's strong foundation, that we are able to be 'living stones' – that means that, like Stephen, we are called to speak up in the world, to reach out, to live the way that God intended for us. We are called to be examples and share our faith, to build up our church in the world. Peter writes in verse 5:

"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5)

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Our third reading is the promise of reassurance. The Psalmist reminds that God is as unflinchingly strong as a rock. God is our *"rock and fortress"* (Psalm 31:3).

When I think of a fortress, I think of it as a safe place for soldiers to be while the battle rages all around. And that is a bit like us in the world today. We cannot and should not pretend that life is easy and safe for us. God's spiritual House is being threatened. Look around and you can see that our world is broken. I am afraid to turn on the news because of the constant media images of war, terrorism, and destruction; the stories of poverty, inequality, political rivalry – the list goes on and on.

We know that each of us face our own personal times of difficulties. We all face times when it is hard to have a strong faith; it's hard to be a living stone. We face times of questioning, hurt, pain, grief. Times when we might feel like we want to throw a stone, literally or metaphorically, that we might want to blame others. Times when it feels like our faith like a building is crumbling around us.

But it is in those times, that we can turn to God as a source of security. We can find safety and rescue in God. Like a stone fortress, God will protect us; God's grace and love will lift us up; God will give us strength that is as strong as any rock or stone. And with that sure foundation of God as our cornerstone, we are able to go out into the world to be living stones, and we are able to call out to God with confidence:

"I trust in You, You are my God" (Psalm 31: 14) Amen.