

1 Peter 2:2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 5 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. 6 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."

7 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,"

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

Sermon: Living Stones

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

The scriptures this week are all about stones. The reading from Acts describes a young Saul witnessing the stoning of Stephen – the first recorded Christian martyr. The second reading talks about Jesus as a living stone, and also us, his church, as living stones.

Stones are strong; there is solidity - a permanence about stones. We use stone when we want to make something enduring, something that will last. Think of Stonehenge, the pyramids, the great stone heads at Easter Island, and various statues and fountains. We erect gravestones to mark the places of our loved ones for generations, and don't forget that shiny stone we wear to mark our engagement, our eternal love for our mates.

So, not surprisingly, the bible is also full of references to stones. When God parted the Red Sea, Moses built a cairn of stones to mark the occasion. When God stopped the flooding Jordan so the Israelites could cross over into the Promised Land, Joshua built a similar reminder. Jacob had his dream of wrestling with God sleeping on a stone pillow, Moses brought water from a stone in Horeb, Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice on a stone.

The Ten Commandments were carved in stone – once by God and again by Moses. David struck down Goliath with stones, and we can't forget the stone Mary found rolled away from the tomb on Easter morning. God is often referred to as a rock in the Psalms, indeed in psalm 31 this morning God is referred to as a rock of refuge – a fortress that cannot be moved or broken. There are plenty of other references to stones in our Bible – these are just a few.

Our third scripture reading this morning is attributed to Peter – who you will remember was originally Simon until Jesus himself renamed him Peter. Peter – Petros - means stone – and he is the rock on which Jesus will found his church. In this morning's text, Peter the Rock writes of Jesus as a stone.

Jesus is the stone upon which the whole church is built.

In verse four, he is the "the living Stone."

In verse six, he is "the cornerstone."

In verse seven, he is "the capstone."

In verse eight, he is the "stone that causes men to stumble."

Jesus is the stone the builders rejected, and also the stone that is precious to every believer. Ultimately, Jesus is the stone chosen by God.

In a few short verses, Peter the Rock refers to Jesus as a rock in seven different ways. Some of them are easy for us – the cornerstone or capstone. The cornerstone is a large stone used at the base of a corner where two walls come together; it holds the other stones in place. A capstone is the last stone placed in an arch, right at the top in the center. Both sides of the arch lean against the capstone, the capstone, like the cornerstone, bears the weight of the structure. This sounds like the Jesus we know, the stone precious to every believer.

Some of the other descriptions are more challenging to us – the stone the builders rejected. The builders are the architects of our society – the secular and religious rulers, the powerful and popular people. They rejected Jesus and turned him into a stone that was persecuted and crucified. The world wanted nothing to do with this stone, and still doesn't. We don't like to dwell on that aspect of Jesus more than we have to.

Peter also called Jesus the stone that causes men to stumble. This is confusing - isn't Jesus the savior? How can he cause people to stumble, how can the son of God be a barrier to people coming to God? Isn't he himself the way?

He's a stumbling block because worldly logic tells us that a God who allowed himself to be killed by his creation can't be much of a God. The world doesn't know what to do with a God who can be shamed and abused publicly. This is why Paul writes of the gospel being foolishness to the wise.

Jesus is also a stumbling block because when we encounter Jesus, we are faced with our own true selves. When we see the glory of Jesus, we can't help but realize how petty and selfish we are most of the time. Naturally, we don't like that feeling of not measuring up, we want to think of ourselves as good; good in a moral sense, and good enough in the sense of being self-sufficient and able to take care of things on our own. Good in our being and also good at doing. Jesus becomes a stumbling block because when we see him, we also see how much we need him as our savior, and it makes us uncomfortable. Jesus reflects back to us our reality.

But, this reflecting of reality back to us is not all negative – remember, we are made in the image of God. Peter wrote of Jesus as a living stone, and he applied those same words to us. We too are living stones, and we are to be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood. These aren't just Peter's words, Jesus himself spoke about this before his crucifixion.

One day Jesus was walking past the temple, that great house for God originally built by Solomon that was destroyed in the Babylonian invasions, then rebuilt again decades later. When Jesus walked by it was not long after a twenty year restoration project by Herod that rebuilt much of the temple. He looked at the massive structure and said 'destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' Nobody seemed to understand him at the time, but we understand what he meant.

God does not live in big stone buildings. He doesn't live in the temple, he doesn't live in the church. He lives through every believer who is made in his image. Jesus had no intention of erecting a temple of stone as people thought. He spent three days defeating death, crushing the power of sin over his people so that he could raise up a real temple of God, not a stone building that we try to put God into, but a temple of flesh and blood – a living temple for the living God, made from living stones.

We are those stones. We are the building blocks of the temple. When Jesus said to Peter – you are the rock upon which I will build my church, he named Peter as a cornerstone, an anchor stone for the rest of us.

If any of you have tried to build with stones, you know how challenging it is. There are two methods of building with stone. One is to cut each stone to the right shape to fit among the other stones – this is no easy job. Cutting and splitting stone takes a lot of effort, and if it's not done correctly the stone will break apart and be ruined.

The other way to build with stone is by having plenty of stones and sorting through them to find just the right one to fit the gap that you have.

If we are the living stones in God's temple, then we must either be cut and shaped to fit our particular places, or we must be carefully selected for the place we are in. The important thing to note here, is that we ourselves are not capable of determining this. We are not the architect, we are the stones.

Shaping other stones is not our job. Have you noticed that when we try to shape other stones, when we tell people who they should be, how they should act, that it often doesn't turn out very well? Sometimes we try to get other people to behave the way we would like, to look the way that we would like, so that they will fit into our church. I spent some time with a teen earlier this week who used to go to church, but was invited to leave because she dyed her hair blue. Her pastor told her she was setting a bad example for the other youth and that she was no longer welcome.

This kind of thing happens more than we realize. Sometimes it is explicit, as in the case of this girl. More often this shaping is done in a more passive aggressive way though condemning looks, seemingly innocuous comments that contain sharp barbs, or those 'if only' statements. You know the ones: he's such a nice man, if only he would cut his hair/quit smoking/stop hanging out with those people.

This is wrong. Like unskilled stone cutters we ruin many stones that could otherwise have been useful in the temple. In our zeal to shape others we ourselves become a stumbling stone to them, and chase them from the church.

Instead of focusing on shaping - on turning every rock into a brick, with a uniform size and shape – are called to welcome stones of all sizes and shapes into our church family, no matter how jagged or dirty they may be.

If we try to be stone cutters, shaping those rough stones we encounter in the world, we will most often mess it up. By instead welcoming them into a loving fellowship, they will become shaped and cut through their experiences with the Holy Spirit – then it will be God shaping them, not us.

I know the plans I have for you, God says through Jeremiah. I don't know the plans God has for you, and so it would be foolish for me to try to shape any one of you. It's a fool's errand that doesn't benefit you or me.

I had mentioned two ways of building with stone – cutting and shaping, which we just talked about, and the other was through selection – finding just the right stone that fits well with its neighbours. The children's story this morning was about being selected to fit into the right spot.

God has created each of us with gifts, with particular strengths and abilities. We were made to fit in particular spots – there is a particular gap that you, and only you, fits into perfectly. That place was made for you, and you for that place. I think it was Einstein that said you can't judge a fish on how well it climbs a tree; his point is that when we are not in our proper place, not only are we ineffective, we are ridiculous.

My eldest, Mikal, and his friend spent a week up north a couple of years ago where they learned to balance rocks. When we went camping as a family later that summer I got to see Mikal in action. He created tall towers of stones – not stacks of flat rocks, but spires that looked impossible, with huge rocks at odd angles, with the entire structure resting upon a single point.

He didn't break rocks, or chip away at them. He selected them. He would lift several rocks, testing their weight, their shape, and their size. And when he found just the right rock it could only stand a certain way. There was only one position in which that rock would find its right balance point and distribute the weight of the tower to keep it in balance.. He had to get the right rock, and place it in just the right position, and more often than not he would have to work with several rocks at the same time – holding and rotating each to find that perfect balance point.

This is what the master builder does with us. Each of us has a shape that is determined. We are rough in places, smooth in others. We have corners, hollows, and jagged parts. God will select us and place us with other people in such a way that we hold each other together. We lean on one another, we support others above as we are in turn supported from below. Some points of contact have great pressure, while others do not – our situations and positions vary as much as our shapes do.

If we are carefully selected stones, each with a place to be, then we should be where God has placed us. By this I'm not saying that we passively remain where we are and do nothing, remember we aren't dead stones, we are living stones. I'm not saying we just accept whatever the world throws at us and say – God wills it, I'm being obedient. That's not obedience, that's laziness.

I'm talking about a more active obedience here. I first came to Christ about thirteen years ago, and God called me into ministry at Oakridge church in London. That was my place. Then he called me to go to

school and get my theology degree, and during that time he called me to St James, near St Thomas. Now my place is here in Norfolk with you. Being obedient is not merely staying where you are, but is all about listening for God's voice and doing what he asks. Hearing that voice was the focus of last week's sermon.

Following that voice is both our responsibility and our joy. As we walk daily with God, God will continue to shape us – to smooth out our edges, or perhaps to add an edge. He shapes us as we seek him in daily prayer, in meditation, in contemplation. He shapes us as he places us in places of pressure, where we rub up against each other.

As we jumble together in communities of faith we find our places, we are erected into an edifice, a work of living stone that stands throughout ages, when all else crumbles. That's what we're doing right now as we praise God, read his word, and listen for his voice; we are seeking our place, and we are being shaped as we do so.

This church, God's church, is made up of living stones, called to be a sign of the presence of God in our community. We do not go to church, we do not do church. We are the church – a bulwark against darkness and chaos; a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, an elegant tower of grace and purpose. Formed and built by God, with Jesus as the head, the capstone that holds us all together.

Praise be to God.
Amen.