Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Easter 5A
Peace, Seattle
May 22, 2011 epk
Acts 7:54-60, Psalm 31:1-5, Peter 2:2-10

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

This morning we have a strange and wonderful assortment of texts, and running through the first and second lessons and the psalm (and maybe even the gospel if we're creative enough...) are images clustered around rocks and stones.

The first lesson tells us of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death because of his testimony about Jesus.

When Stephen retold God's salvation story with Jesus in the starring role; when he told the Jerusalem council they had rejected and killed the very one whom God had appointed for the world's salvation, they couldn't handle the message, so they picked up stones and killed the messenger.

Stephen has been loved and revered for the past two millennia because he did not shrink from the task of proclaiming Jesus as God's Son, crucified and risen.

Stones, we see, can be instruments of judgment, instruments of death…but not only that.

Psalm 31 shows us another side. In verse 3, the Psalmist cries out:

> LORD BE MY STRONG ROCK, A CASTLE TO KEEP ME SAFE, FOR YOU ARE MY CRAG AND MY STRONGHOLD. . . MY TOWER OF STRENGTH.

When placed according to God's gracious design, stones can become places of refuge, places of protection. The God to whom David makes his appeal is the God who surrounds the weak and vulnerable with an impregnable fortress, one which will never be shaken down.

When we're set upon by the world, when those we counted as friends seek to do us harm, says David, we have a rock of ages, a Lord, a refuge we can count on.

In our second lesson the author extends the metaphor to a community of converts:

> COME TO CHRIST, A LIVING STONE, he writes, THOUGH REJECTED BY MORTALS YET CHOSEN AND PRECIOUS IN GOD'S SIGHT, AND LIKE LIVING STONES, LET YOURSELVES BE BUILT INTO A SPIRITUAL HOUSE. [1 Peter 2:4-5a]

Living stones!

A know a woman who, during a time of loss and transition in her life, traveled to China. While she was there she went to see and to climb on China's Great Wall—one of the great human-made wonders of the world.

When she returned home, she'd gained a new perspective on her life and a new confidence. Some of the strength and stamina of that 3,000 mile stone wall seemed to have rubbed off on her.

Some of the great stone cathedrals of Europe took, literally, centuries to build. Those masons, artisans and laborers who began work on one of these great structures had no expectation that they would see their efforts completed. Yet, they kept at it, making their contribution day-by-day, stone by stone, knowing that generations would pass before the cathedral was completed.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Whether stones are used for building a fortress, a great cathedral, or the Great Wall of China they aren't just plucked up and put in place willy-nilly. They are dressed and shaped so they fit precisely where they're meant to go.

The same is true of the living stones—you and me—which God uses for his great spiritual house. To be part of the spiritual house God is constructing is to be fashioned into a community.

When we offer the raw material of our lives for God's purposes, God does not leave us as we were. No, we are made to fit around the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, our foundation and our future.

The Marty Haugen hymn, ALL ARE WELCOME,[1] which we'll be singing in a few minutes, invites us to build a house and a life together, that is a place of love, safety, and forgiveness—but also a place where passionate speech, and care for the outcast and stranger have a home. A welcome place.

Part of what we're about as we gather in small group listening posts this week is asking how that building project is going—if the way we're living out our mission conforms to the design God intends.

_____

The summer after 7th grade I was part of a summer science program that went on field trips to lots of sites within a couple hour drive of our home base in Albert Lea, Minnesota. One of those field trips was to a limestone quarry to collect fossils.

Oh was it exciting to be at that quarry! Everywhere we walked our feet tread upon rock that, 100 million years before, had been at the bottom of a great ocean. Fossils were everywhere, pieces of ancient history frozen in time.

We filled our pockets with them and they became part of our science projects and collections and fed our imaginations about a vast world, an extinct world which lived no longer, but which, through these fossil remains, we could still somehow touch.

Jerry Buss, director of evangelical outreach for our synod, met with our Vision Task Force last Wednesday and challenged us to consider new ways of tooling our outreach to meet the needs of the huge unchurched population that surround us.

An unspoken question the conversation raised for me was, how far are we willing to go in order to "reach beyond the wood and stone"[2] of this building to serve, to witness, & to share the story of Jesus? To invite people who don't speak "Lutheran" to be part of God's mission here?

I don't think we get there by simply maintaining the status quo.

When we consider the challenges facing the church in the 21st century we may wonder at times whether some kid on a field trip a thousand years from now will discover evidence of a way of life called Christianity that had gone extinct.

Historian Phyllis Tickle, writing about the great change cycle we in church and society are caught up in right now, has dubbed it THE GREAT EMERGENCE.[3]

---

[1] Text: Marty Haugen, Music: Marty Haugen. © 1994 GIA Publications, Inc. Published in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2006) hymn #641.
[2] Excerpted from verse four of ibid.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

What is God up to, where is the Spirit of God leading us in these tumultuous times?
How do we keep our center in the midst of it all?

If there is a danger that something precious will be lost as the church evolves to keep in touch with the shifts and changes of our larger culture, is there not also a danger that the church will become a museum piece? A fossilized relic?

Whatever else we are called to be about during this second decade of the 21st century, we are certainly being challenged to engage our imaginations in our approach to theology and mission.

Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell says that in order to look discover and reclaim the vitality that is hidden beneath the accumulated layers of church history, we "have to rediscover a forgotten art of using our imagination in our theology." "Such imagination," she writes "is the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life to whatever has become fossilized."[4]

The work, the mission, to which God has called us involves *both* nurturing a caring community *and* (as we state in our current Vision Statement) "venturing beyond ourselves" so others can discover—perhaps for the first time—the radically gracious, radically inclusive love of God in Jesus Christ, and the rich, purposeful life that goes with it.

> 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.

Christ's work on the cross has transformed us from people destined for death to people destined for life! This is our foundation! May it be, by God's grace, our future.

Amen.

---

[3] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Baker Books, © 2008.
[4] Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *The Women Around Jesus*. 1982.