

## THE WEEK OF GRACIOUS LIVING

### 1 Peter 2:2-10

*A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jacob Bolton on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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

*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. 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." 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," 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. 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. 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.*

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The old adage states that "timing is everything." Well, if that's the case, then the timing was perfect in the fall of 2005 at the first church I ever served. Many of you know that it was Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, a church at that time was pastored by Rev. Dr. Tom Tewell, beloved former member of this church, Westminster Presbyterian, whose name you can still find in the hallway alongside our elevator, celebrating his formation here and his ultimate career as a congregational leader and visionary preacher. The timing was perfect, because my very first few days serving there involved celebrating the culmination of a four-year building project. In fact, one of the first congregational events I attended was one of the ribbon-cutting ceremonies; I stood and smiled for photos celebrating a key moment in a project that up until that time I had very little to do with. Aware that I had quite the responsibility ahead in ushering in that congregations next season.

Situated in Midtown Manhattan, years before this one moment in time the congregation had sold her air rights—it could no longer build up—meaning if the church wanted to expand, the only way to do that was by digging down. When looking at the Manhattan skyline, people often wonder why the skyscrapers are mainly found in certain areas of the city, and that has a lot to do with the original geophysical nature—the *terroir*, if you will—of the isle of Manhattan. While the areas around Houston Street—where the average buildings today are around 4 or 5 stories—was marshland 500 years ago, the towers of midtown are built upon solid rock, and that rock has provided the firm foundation that allows so many famous buildings to pierce the sky. The Chrysler Building, the Empire State building, St. Patrick's Cathedral—all have this geological gift to thank for their support.

Fifth Avenue is in that same neighborhood, and she was built on that same rock, in that same fashion. And so the church worshipped for a year at a nearby Synagogue (sound familiar?), dug 30 feet down, through rock and schist and stone, in an effort to create a better space for ministry and programs for generations to come. As the congregation dug deeper and deeper into the bedrock on which the old and yet new congregation had been formed, the pieces of schist that were carted off became colloquially known as “living stones,” a direct 1 Peter 2 reference, indicating the power of this metaphor and the “always-reforming” concept we Presbyterians hold dear.

I welcome the good people from the Alexandria Childrens Chorus here this morning, so many young voices, leading us in worship today. And I want to point out to you that we as good people of faith, or even merely good people of culture, are well versed in the myriad of rock imagery that Peter reminds us of in today’s passage. Our hymnody is full of these: “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand;” “Angels in bright raiment, rolled the stone away, kept the folded grave clothes, where the body lay, thine be the glory risen conquering Son.” And of course, “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”

Scripture, too, is rife with stone imagery. When the wandering Hebrew pilgrims are lost in the wilderness, Moses causes water to gush forth from a stone by striking it with his staff. How important were those five stones that David picked up by the stream before his clash with Goliath? Jesus teaches that the wiseman builds his house upon a rock. From an interfaith perspective, The Temple of the Rock is built on the site of some of the holiest locations in all three Abrahamic religions.

Now, we find ourselves in the season of Eastertide—that blessed 50 days after Easter, but before Pentecost—and this calls to my mind all the “living stones” that play important roles in all the stories of Holy Week, the last week of Christ’s life. This may seem like a bit of a stretch from the distance of 2 millennia away, but I want to assure you that this was anything but to the original audience. They were the ones that routinely walked those streets, ate those olives, worshipped in that temple. They actually knew the location of Golgotha. Additionally, with the authorship of this letter often regarded as being written and commonly read throughout the Mediterranean before the final editions of any of our canonical gospels, the “living stones, Christ as cornerstone” metaphor would have quite possibly, if not probably, been in the vernacular of the very first Christians. Thus, to celebrate Eastertide we must first begin with Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday.

Scripture says that as Jesus rode into the city, people lay down their cloaks before him and waved palm branches as signs honoring and glorifying Jesus. The people shout, “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This does not go unnoticed; and when the Temple leaders ask Jesus to quiet his followers, Jesus replies, “I tell you, if these people were silent, then even the stones would shout out.” The stones are given voice as active participants, assisting in this joyous event. These stones are alive: living stones, with one purpose, to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

During the night of Maundy Thursday after Christ is arrested, Jesus is denied three times by the man who has been given the nickname, “Peter - The Rock.” Is it mere coincidence, that the same figure this epistle is named after, uses the term Living Stones, in his writing? Why would the author of Peter use this image when Peter is in other locations throughout the New Testament, named as the rock upon which Jesus planned to build the

church? Is it a play on Peter's own Christ-given moniker? And after Peter denies Christ, he spends the rest of his life not as a denier of the message and life of Christ but as an ambassador for the chief cornerstone, with one purpose: to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Scripture tells us that at the moment that Jesus dies on Good Friday there is an Earthquake, a clear reminder that the earth is in mourning alongside humanity at the death of our savior. The stones are alive. On Holy Saturday, Jesus' body rests entombed by rock; but then on Easter Sunday that stone is rolled away, so that the cornerstone may come forth and live and breathe among us once again. For if Christ is alive and we too then shall live, then the cornerstone is alive; and we are the stones, and we shall live also.

Peter is a wise author—and a man of both deep faith and deep relationships—so it is not just the stories of scripture that Peter alludes to with his living stones metaphor, but to the people in our shared faith lives as well: for these are the living stones of our faith. These are the people with whom we are building a royal and holy priesthood. These living stones are the living pillars of spiritual fortitude that have inspired us to greater service and a deeper commitment to trust, belief, and community. Last week Pastor Olivia invited us to tell our stories, and it is the people whose stories we most often want to share that are the Living Stones in our lives. What stories did you tell last week?

When I think of the people that have been and continue to be living stones in this place I think of George Pera, whose library can be found right through those doors; I think of Karen Blomberg, whose courtyard can be found right through those windows. I think of Pam Beard who has taught at Westminster Preschool for over 35 years. 35 years of four-year-old friends. There are pictures in the walls of each of those classes in the preschool wing. I think of the numerous people whose lives have found home here, yet due to family or service, employment or new opportunities, have not, for instance, a space named after them, 35 years of their photo on the walls; but who have left their mark in the ministries of this place in ways far beyond measure.

These are the people that fulfill and honor the call and challenge that Peter requires of us; for when we honor the chief cornerstone, we become living stones ourselves and “like living stones we must let ourselves be built into a spiritual house, one that will become a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” And that is where we must finally turn, for building a royal house of living stones sounds to me like what we call in the 21<sup>st</sup> century “discipleship”—or perhaps what Dr. King named as “beloved community.” A royal house of living stones sounds to me like home, like Sanctuary, like church.

Home is a central theme in the world's great religions: Jews seeking a homeland with God; Christians proclaiming that God dwells within our hearts; Muslims facing home to pray; Buddhists finding a home in true enlightenment; Druids and Wiccans worshipping gods who make their homes in the ocean or the trees. Human beings build temples to shelter God's presence; we mark sacred places with shrines; we bury, float, or burn our dead, that they might find their way home to God. But friends, none of us need do that alone, because of the living stones we sit alongside today as we worship. Because of the collected memory of the living stones that both came before and have yet to come—those we know by the name “the communion of saints.” And because of the sacred relationship between each of us and the chief cornerstone. For it is Christ's sacrificial and redemptive love that acts as a Holy Mortar between us, that binds the living stones and the cornerstone all together. The love of Jesus Christ is the Holy Mortar that binds each living stone together, past, present, future.

It is the Holy Mortar that binds us to God. And this Holy Mortar allows us to live courageously, united as one against fear, oppression, persecution; and allows each of us as living stones to overcome trauma, loss, tragedy and pain.

And that is because we, the living stones that have put our faith and our trust in the other living stones of this community, and we, the living stones that have put our faith and our trust in the love of the chief cornerstone, know that what we are building together goes far beyond these walls, that library, and that courtyard. For it is not just what we build, as living stones, but also what we carry. We carry the hopes and dreams of those that went before. We carry the responsibility and honor of wisely preparing a way in the wilderness for those that have yet to come. And the more we love one another, and the more we trust in the Holy Mortar that binds us together, the more evil we fend off together, the more alive we all become together. We are the living stones that have put our faith in the Chief cornerstone, every day again becoming the royal and holy priesthood called to share, support, and to carry the good news of the risen Christ. This is the holy house of God, Christ is the Cornerstone, and you are living stones. And all God's people said, "Amen."