

Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 2023

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Living Stones”

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We bump into stones and rocks everywhere in our scripture readings today. In the Acts reading, **stones become a weapon** used against the apostle Stephen. As we sang the Psalm, we prayed to God, **“be my strong rock.”** Then there’s the reading from 1 Peter, **Peter a name which means rock.** In that one we’re called to, **“Come to [Christ], a living stone”** and **“like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”** Christ is described both as a **cornerstone of faith and as a stumbling block for those who don’t believe.** There are no stones mentioned in the Gospel reading yet since the passage is so often a part of funerals, **it may bring you to a time you stood in a cemetery tent facing a casket or urn and a pile of dirt, surrounded by grave-stones, rocks as memorials.**

Rocks and stones have other associations for each of us as well. I love standing on the banks of the Upper Iowa River with my family **skipping rocks.** Many in Decorah **paint and hide rocks** to surprise others with joy. A stone played a prominent role in the **coronation** of King Charles yesterday. The rocks here in Decorah and in the mountains out West play a role in some of my most lovely and some of my most fearful memories.

Stones can provide shelter, comfort, beauty, and honor. They can cause us to stumble and fall. We can use them for evil and for good. 1 Peter calls us living stones. This speaks to me of the **capacity we all have: to harm others and to shelter; to tear down and to honor; to obstruct and to build up. What will we, as living stones, do with such weighty power and responsibility? We’re called to come to Christ and to let ourselves be built into a spiritual house.** That sounds to me like a beautiful **description of a congregation,** a spiritual house made up of all us living stones.

There is room here for all of who we are to be welcomed, embraced, healed, transformed. Within this spiritual house we **rest,** we are **nourished.** We’re also convicted and challenged. There are **mirrors** that both **reflect back our intrinsic goodness and reveal our sins. We encounter those mirrors in worship and in relationship with one another.** We’re assured that our **sins cannot hold us down,** that we belong to Christ who **releases us from the press and weight** of them.

Together we learn to **pray and act in the name of Jesus,** in ways that are **in line with his liberating work in the world and his humility.** Together, as part of the whole church on earth, we can do even greater works than Jesus did to liberate humanity because we are empowered by Christ’s Spirit and, because we are not bound to the **rocky roads of ancient Palestine.**

I’m so grateful for the spiritual house that is Good Shepherd. We’ve done a lot of important work recently on the physical house for the mission of this congregation. Back in 2017, we en-

gaged in a process of listening, asking, "**How do our buildings and spaces help us serve God and others? How could they help us serve God and others in new ways?**" Since then, we've done several important **physical projects to help us live out our mission**. We also had to spend a lot of time thinking about **how best to reopen** the building safely amid COVID.

All of this has been essential and important work. Yet I'm grateful that we've also had many opportunities to let ourselves be **built into a spiritual house, to tend to how we live together in Christ**. The racial justice work we've been doing is one example of this. Our Racial Justice Statement **holds up a mirror of the intrinsic dignity** of all God's people. It also names the ways **all Americans are shaped by white supremacy. Americans of all races are harmed by a lie. The good news of Jesus works to liberate us all from this crushing lie and to rebuild us into a home for all**.

Within Good Shepherd, we're also addressing how we live out our mission together. Changes to the council and committee structure, made through a congregational vote last November, are already **strengthening the foundation of this house**. Now the whole congregation gets the chance to **live into new ways of being a spiritual house** as we **launch the Flock Ministry**.

Being part of a flock will allow us to **care for one another in a smaller group. Shepherds will help to facilitate that care and connection**. Flocks will also get to **care for this spiritual house together** by sharing in the congregation's worship and hospitality ministry together one month at a time. Being part of a flock and part of a spiritual house, asks us to **let go of focusing on our own piles of rocks, whatever those may be**, and to instead offer ourselves for something larger. I'm excited to see how this Flock Ministry unfolds for us all. There will be some **rocky patches, some bumps along the way**, but that will help us to grow.

You and I, all of us, are living stones. We need not fear the weight of this responsibility. It is Christ who **grounds our lives**, Christ who **builds us into something more, Christ who holds us together. Christ promises that he prepares a place for us in the house and heart of our triune, relational God, now and forever**.

He makes a way to us and a way for us always.
We have all that we need.

Thanks be to God, our strong rock.