

“The Sign of the Stone”

Introduction: When we read, at our Maundy Thursday worship, the “passion narrative” that gives us the account of the last hours of Jesus’ life, the text tells us that after Jesus and his disciples celebrate the Passover supper, they sang a hymn as they prepared to leave the table. I wonder, what did they sing? I wonder, what did they sound like? Like a bunch of guys at a soccer game, or like the men’s acapella group, Straight No Chaser?! The first question (what they sang) is perhaps the easiest to answer as there was a standard set of songs sung by worshippers who attended the festivals in Jerusalem, songs known as the Hallel (or “praise”) psalms, made up of psalms 113-118. In fact, the crowd began to sing from Psalm 118 when Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. They sang out, “LORD, save us!” (“Hosanna”) and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” (118:25-26; cf. Ma. 21:9).

Psalm 118 celebrates God’s rescue from distress, enemies, and the threat of death, all of which were expected, or at least longed for of Jesus, by the crowd that welcomed him. It also speaks about a stone that was rejected but which God retrieved and made the cornerstone. It’s likely Jesus and his disciples returned to that song and that cry as they made their way to the Mount of Olives.

This stone was not only referenced in the psalm, but Jesus also used it as the punch line in a parable he shared with the crowd while teaching in the temple courts during the week. It obviously helped Jesus gain perspective on the very events he was in the middle of.

So this morning we want to ask: What’s up with the stone? And why would Jesus be teaching and singing about a stone during the last days of his life? Let’s begin by listening in on the parable he taught, and then consider how this stone serves as yet another sign, or clue, that leads us to the treasure that is Jesus, as well as the nature of the kingdom he has brought.

I. Stones are Everywhere

A. Just like in the woods of New England, stones seem to be found everywhere in the biblical record. We find stones that seal things, like wells, or entrances and exits such as tombs or lion’s dens. We find stones that serve as foundations for houses and altars and temples. We see stones that are used for judgment, to execute people for certain crimes. We hear about stones that memorialize things, like Jacob’s vision of the ladder that stretched from heaven to earth, or Joshua leading God’s people across the Jordan River, or Samuel celebrating the Israelite victory over the Philistines. The stone that commemorated this victory was called *eben-ezer* (“stone of help”), and it served as a reminder of how God had come, yet again, to the rescue of his people.

II. The Parable and The Stone

A. The stone we’re talking about this morning is meant to lead us to Jesus and the rescue he has come to provide. The parable in which we find it is straightforward enough. There is a vineyard—a significant component of the ancient economy—that a certain landowner planted and then rented out. He provided everything the tenants would need to make the vineyard fruitful as they cultivated it, including a wall to offer protection from wild animals, a winepress with which to crush the grapes, and a watchtower for shelter and burglar control. But, at harvest time, when the landowner repeatedly sent his servants to collect the portion of the fruit that belonged to him, the scene turns ugly. The tenants

treated all of the landowners' representatives harshly, time after time, beating some, killing others, and stoning still others. Then, the landowner decided to send his son, figuring the tenants would respect him. But the scene becomes uglier still as the tenants throw the son out and kill him, too. Jesus then asked, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what should he do? Drawn into the movement of the story the listeners, even though they're speaking against themselves, blurt out, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and rent the vineyard to others, who will care for his crop rightly."

B. They were speaking against themselves as it's pretty clear that the landowner stands for God, who entrusted his people, the vineyard, into the care of tenants, the Jewish religious leaders, who failed to use their privileged position to cultivate this vineyard to be a light for the world. As the prophet Isaiah put it, when God looked at his vineyard, he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress" (Isa. 5:7). The servants of the landowner represent the prophets, and the great patience of God, waiting for the tenants to bring fruit. The son of the landowner would stand for Jesus, the Son of God who the tenants ultimately rejected. The new renters are from the people of God throughout the world, of every nation, people and tribe, who make up the citizens of the kingdom of God.

C. Jesus affirms all of this by bringing up the stone: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone' . . . Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." There is a real fusion of images here which we can pull apart into three stones.

1. The first stone, from Psalm 118, the stone the builders rejected, speaks to the vindication of the son. The one who was thrown aside and put to death has been retrieved by God and exalted to the highest honor. This stone has become the cornerstone of the new thing God is doing.

2. The second stone, the one on which folks fall, is taken from Isaiah 8:14-15. This passage warns that those who ignore the Lord and his ways, who don't acknowledge or recognize his identity, will end up, to their peril, tripping and stumbling badly over this stone. Despite God's great patience, the arrival of Jesus does bring a day of reckoning for all who have rejected him.

3. The third stone, the one which crushes those on whom it falls, comes from Daniel 2 and a dream that Daniel had about the kingdoms of the world. The stone here represents the kingdom of God which starts like a small pebble but grows into a great mountain that will eventually crush any and all idolatrous empires, from Babylon to Persia to Rome (and to Russia and even America) and fill the world with God's benevolent rule.

D. Running with this image for a moment longer, this all happens because of the stone that wasn't there. As his followers would soon discover, the unmovable stone of death, that the Roman soldiers thought had sealed Jesus in his tomb, had been rolled away. It was an indication that the Stone of Life was beginning something new. And that something new, as the disciple named Peter would discover, involved us, people who comprise the new tenants of the vineyard. As Peter explains it to the church, the citizens of God's kingdom, [1 Pe. 2:4-5]

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood . . .

E. Peter goes on to quote the same passages Jesus did in his parable, all on his way to making the point that as followers of this living Stone who is Jesus, we are to be a collection of stones that becomes built into a priesthood, people who live in such a way that helps others make a connection to the living Stone, the Stone of Life, who is seated on the throne and rules over the kingdom which has no end, and in which there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:3-5).

So, if the stones in our passages are meant to lead us to Jesus and a better understanding of the kingdom he brings, what we can take courage in is that the stone reveals God's purposes will not be thwarted. His sovereign hand is over the entire roller-coaster of human history, no matter who else may claim to be in charge. Given this, will we be good tenants? Will we look to Jesus to be the cornerstone for the sure foundation we need to live the life that is truly life? Will we seek to draw others to him by the way we live and love? Will we seek to lead people to be reconciled this God? Will we pursue justice and righteousness wherever we see bloodshed and distress?

As this week ahead will remind us, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this. May it be marvelous in our eyes, and in the eyes of the world. May it give us a firm place to stand, and to minister from, as living stones, no matter what, and where, our frontline may be.