

11/20/22 Worship Service

Morning Prayer – Pastor Caleb Yoder

Creator of the stars,
of sunsets and morning chills,
of the earth and its bounty,

We give you thanks and praise.

Our best thoughts and loftiest words do not begin to describe You, or give to you the honor that is your due.

You have not asked us to ascend to your heights,
but instead have saved us by becoming present to us
in Jesus Christ, in his humble birth, his dark valley of the cross, and his resurrection.

You are present now to us in the Holy Spirit.

Because your love is lord of heaven and earth, we are not dismayed, and cannot keep from singing.

As we approach the holiday of Thanksgiving, we renew the invitation we have to practice gratitude each and every day of the year.

We give thanks for the Community Thanksgiving Dinner that took place last Sunday at the elementary school. We give thanks for the many hands that worked together to make this event possible, and we give thanks for the fellowship and the sharing of bread.

We likewise give thanks for the upcoming union of Erin Brubaker and her fiancé, Dylan Slabach next weekend. We pray for safe travels for Karl and Marcia and family members as they celebrate together.

We continue to bring to you the people on our minds navigating health concerns, or the many people who are sick these days with Covid, influenza, or any number of other viruses going around.

We give thanks for Karen Unruh's successful knee replacement this past and we pray that your strength will be with her as she recovers.

In this coming week, we pray for families as we celebrate Thanksgiving. Teach us a spirit of gratitude and mindfulness of the blessings we overlook.

At the same time, we pray for our sisters and brothers who carry heavy burdens and choking grief that is only compounded in the holiday season.

Let your consolation be felt in the midst of anguish.

Help us to trust you to pick up the broken pieces and create something beautiful that doesn't erase the cracks and rough edges.

Restore us to wholeness and give us a new song to sing.

Inspire our compassion and solidarity for one another.

O God, let our lives be like living stones that are carefully stacked together to become part of the building of your kingdom.

Let also all the stones of our lives, both the joy-filled and the grief, likewise be built into this spiritual building. You know how to take each stone, both the smooth as well as the jagged, and find a place for it in your eternal and redeeming purpose.

Hear O God, when we cry out to you. Be gracious to us and answer.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

Sermon - Thanking God with Stones – Pastor Lois Harder

The inspiration for this service – and this sermon – came from the song that the choir will sing later. I thought it might be helpful to hear the song at the beginning of the service as well as at the end so that you have a little context. Delton is going to play a clip of the composer of the song, Jim Croegaert, giving a very brief explanation of how the song came to him. And then he'll play and sing it. You might want to turn to it, so you can follow along with the text – it's at number 629.

When I learned that this would be the worship music for today's service, I began to think about biblical stories that talk about stones – and how to weave those stories together with the theme of thanksgiving. As the Bible study group reminded me on Wednesday evening, there's a lot of material! Thank you for that! And rest assured... I've culled and narrowed and condensed since Wednesday.

Caleb and Marilyn will come now and give us a quick re-cap of just a few of those Old Testament stories about altars made of stones that Jim mentioned in the song.

Readers Theater – Pastor Caleb Yoder and Marilyn Unruh Flaming

1 – The ancient Israelites often set up stone altars, sometimes for sacrifices, but also as markers - a way to remember and honor a time and place when they were particularly aware of God's faithful presence with them. In Genesis 12 we find the story of Abram building an altar. Abram had followed the Lord's instructions when God said, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you..."

2 – He went, as the Lord had told him, with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all the possessions they had accumulated. And they set out for the land of Canaan.

1 – And when they finally arrived there safely, Abram built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

2 – Genesis 26 tells the story of Isaac building an altar. There was a famine in the land and Isaac had to deal with Abimelek (Ah-bim'-ah-lech) the king of the Philistines (Fil-is'-steens).

1 – It might have seemed a lot easier to leave that place and go to Egypt, but the Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you." So Isaac stayed.

2 – He planted crops in that land and became very wealthy – which made the Philistines envious. So all the wells that Isaac's father's servants had dug, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth.

1 – There was a lot of quarreling about the wells and water rights. Isaac re-dug his father Abraham's wells and finally came to a sort of tenuous peace with Abimelek and the Philistines.

2 – Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord, acknowledging God's presence with them through those difficult times.

1 – In Deuteronomy 27, we read the story of Moses building an altar: Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today... And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal (Eee'-ball). Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones."

2 – I Samuel 7: When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah (Mihz'-pah), the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them.

1 – When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines."

2 – Then, while Samuel was sacrificing a suckling lamb he cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him.

1 – There was a battle which the Israelites won, so Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

So... Ebenezer means "stone of help". So when we sing *Come Thou Fount* and we get to the verse that goes, "Here I raise my Ebenezer"... that's what we're singing about.

In each of these stories, (and there are others too) we read about people who gave high priority to the act of worship and of giving thanks to God. They were aware and attentive to the times when they felt and knew that God had been present with them – as is sometimes the case, they

were looking back and it was often in hindsight that they had these realizations. These were not always times of unfettered joy or unchallenged victories. They were most often times when the people had experienced difficult things – arduous journeys, hard-fought battles, significant losses, deep doubts or disappointments. No doubt, there was joy in the act of worship and praise. But I can also imagine some grief and maybe even some anger as the stones were being gathered and the people had time to reflect on their losses, their questions, their fears about the future – I can imagine them thinking, “Yes, God has been with us so far, but what will tomorrow bring or next week or next year? Who’s to say that the Philistines won’t come and put dirt in our wells again?”

This ritual of creating something, of taking the time and spending the effort to gather materials, in this case stones, and then build something with them, might suggest that in that process, there was space and time – to reflect on where they’d been, to recount the ways that they had lived and worked and fought and trusted together, and most importantly, it set aside time for them to worship God and to give thanks for God’s steadfast love and presence through yet another passage – whatever it had been.

Maybe there’s something valuable for us to learn from the ancients as we read about this ritual. There’s not much extra space or time built in to our 21st century way of life, for... well, much of anything! But especially not for this sort of reflecting, noticing, and giving thanks for God’s presence. I wonder if there’s something we could incorporate into our worship life that would serve as similar kind of purpose?

Moving from the Hebrew tradition, I thought of the passage from I Peter that talks about Jesus and his followers being living stones! This is I Peter 2, verses 1-7 from the NIV:

2 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house^[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”^[b]

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”

The writer here is using some mixed images to try to help the readers understand what it means to be followers of Jesus. First, get rid of all the traits that make it impossible to live together in trusting community. Malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander... those will all destroy relationships. Then, acknowledge that you are babies in the faith and you need that spiritual milk to help you grow.

And then, in verse 4 we read the invitation to see Jesus and to come to him as the *living* Stone. The first readers and hearers of this letter surely would have been familiar with the Hebrew tradition of building stone altars. But to think of Jesus (and his followers) as living stones – dynamic, learning, growing, those who are in process, full of life and life-giving – well, that would have presented a whole new and exciting image! Of course, Peter says, Jesus is the precious cornerstone – the stone on which all the others depend and on which everything is built.

But, Peter writes, it's not enough to simply believe in Jesus, we must *act out* our faithfulness, *offer* our willingness to be the stones that are "being built into a spiritual house". We are a work in progress, each of us, individually and all of us, together. We're being called to bring our imperfect, wounded, gifted, grateful selves – and set them down, rough as they are, knowing that God can make them holy.