

Sermon—“Sheep and Stones”

4/25/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There stood Peter and John before Israel’s rulers, elders, and scribes. While walking to the temple the day before, the two of them had healed a man who had been crippled since birth. Now, if the man had kept the miracle to himself, Peter and John probably would have spent the night sleeping at home rather than confined to a jail cell. But the man, understandably overjoyed at his healing, had begun leaping and praising God in and around the temple, thus attracting a large crowd. Just a few days before, Peter’s preaching had helped convince three thousand people to repent and be baptized. His preaching after the healing helped convince five thousand more. For Israel’s religious and political leaders, such powerful preaching and dramatic growth had to be addressed.

“By what power or by what name did you do this,” Peter and John are asked the next morning. Israel’s leaders knew that the previous day’s crowd would not have gone unnoticed by Roman authorities. If they wanted to continue to keep the peace within Jerusalem, not to mention the peace between Israel and Rome, the *Pax Romana*, they needed to make sure that such scenes did not happen again in the future. That is part of the reason why they instructed the two disciples to no longer preach in Jesus’ name before releasing them, in the passage right after today’s; because large, agitated crowds put everyone at risk when not done in the name and power of Rome. At the same time, they also put forth this instruction because of how Peter and John were challenging their name and power.

Imagine with me for a moment that you are one of these temple leaders. A few weeks ago, you watched as a man named Jesus was crucified for preaching that he is the “Son of God”

and “King of the Jews.” Now, your assumption had been that Jesus’ death would bring an end to the controversy. Instead, three days later his disciples began proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead and calling on others to repent and believe. As already mentioned, their preaching convinced many people, with Peter and John playing central roles. “We are the ones,” you and the other leaders angrily think to yourselves, “who have spent our lives studying the Torah and serving God. What gives these ‘uneducated,’ ‘ordinary’ men the right to declare that they too are speaking on God’s behalf?”

Well, at least for Peter, the answer to this question was the Holy Spirit. You see, as Peter stood before those assembled, he felt the power and presence of the Holy Spirit come upon him. “The reason why John and I are being questioned today,” Peter began his sermon, “is not because we are seeking to incite a revolution, but because we did a good deed. Out of compassion, we healed a man in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Yes, the same Jesus Christ whom you condemned to death and was raised on the third day. Not long before his death, Jesus declared to you that he is the cornerstone, the name under which we must be saved. Learn from my example, from the times when I denied Jesus before hearing the cock crow. Believe like me that he, the stone which you, the builders, have rejected has become the cornerstone. Come and believe.” But the leaders refused, and I’m fairly certain that part of the reason why is that did not take too kindly to Jesus be called the cornerstone.

Peter, like Jesus before him, did not use these words by chance. Rather, he was quoting from Psalm 118, a psalm traditionally sung each year while the Passover lamb was being slaughtered, as well as at the beginning of the meal on the festival’s first night. They were words with deep religious meaning, words that every faithful Jew knew by heart, words which Peter was now using to make a very specific and significant point. Buildings made of stone, like those

built during Jesus' day, were much like a puzzle. Each stone needed to be fitted perfectly into its own space. What this meant that most stones were chosen based on whatever shape or size was needed at the time. The one stone that was not selected this way, but rather very carefully at the beginning of the project was the cornerstone. Since every other stone either rested upon or was lined up with the cornerstone, it was essential that it be fairly large, relatively square, and without defect. For Peter, the only person who could fulfill this role, the only perfect person who can be our cornerstone, who can support us and on whom we should align ourselves, is Jesus. That's why Peter called him our cornerstone.

So, you see, in quoting Psalm 118, Peter was challenging Israel's religious and political leaders to acknowledge their unfaithfulness, that they had not treated Jesus as their cornerstone, and to seek forgiveness; a challenge much like Peter had received from Jesus not long before. On the shores of the Galilean Sea, you might remember, the risen Lord had asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" One for each time that Peter had denied Jesus. When Peter responded that he did, Jesus in turn commanded him to go and "Feed my sheep." That day in the temple, Peter was seeking to fulfill this commandment. He was seeking to feed the sheep of his Good Shepherd, not simply by proclaiming the good news to those who were already a part of the flock, to those considered themselves part of "the Way" and would later become known as Christians, but by extending God's love and grace to everyone who might listen.

As we heard in today's Gospel lesson, just because a person is not currently a part of the flock does not mean that Jesus is not their Good Shepherd. We are all unique. We have all lived different lives and heard God's call in different ways. For some of us, the strength and clarity of this call has led us to set ourselves firmly atop Christ our cornerstone, to let him be the rock upon which we stand, to closely follow our Good Shepherd. For others, the place where we fit is a bit

further away, at a place where we have aligned ourselves with Jesus, a place where we can follow him, but not necessarily as close as others. And then there are those among us who are struggling to hear God's call and still awaiting the day when we learn that a stone of our particular shape and size is needed, when we recognize that Jesus has been our Good Shepherd all along and embrace his call to join the flock. One of the temptations that we as Christian often face is the desire to divide the world into two kinds of people: Christians and non-Christians, sinners and saints, sheep and goats. But as we heard in our Scripture readings from John and Acts, the world is not quite so simple, Jesus' flock is not quite so simple, and the building which God is constructing here and in heaven is not quite so cookie-cutter.

So, you might ask, what should we as Christians do? How can we seek to become the type of people whom God is calling us to be, to be faithful sheep following our Good Shepherd? We can begin by affirming that all of us, no matter our race, sex, age, nationality, or religion, are children of God. Just like a shepherd starts teaching a lamb their name as soon as they are born, our Good Shepherd has been calling out to each one of us, to every person across the entire world, our entire lives. God desires to teach us all who we are and to whom we belong, so that we all might one day follow him. And this call does not just happen once. In his article "Shepherd Poems of John 10," Kenneth Bailey describes the great lengths to which modern-day shepherds go to guide their flocks. According to Bailey, it is common in the Middle East for shepherds to guide their flocks by walking slowly in front of them, while giving a distinctive, ten-second call every forty seconds. That's a lot of calling and a lot of energy put out by these shepherds. How much more often do you think God is calling out to each one of us?

Becoming this type of people also depends upon us inviting others to be a part of the flock. Following our Good Shepherd is not something that we can do on our own, in private. It

requires that we come together as the Body of Christ, so that we might join together in prayer, praise, and fellowship. One of the things that has made this past year so difficult is our inability to come together as we once did. We long to be able to step out from behind our computer screens and worship God with one another, in person. I know I do. And yet, the past year has also taught us that new ways of doing things are not always so bad. Whether we want to admit it or not, the world and the church are changing. There are some people, going forward, who will find greater strength and comfort in being a part of an online Body of Christ, and that's before we even consider how we should be in ministry to and with those who are homebound and immuno-compromised. There are many ways to be a part of a flock and there are just as many ways for us to invite them to become a part of it.

And finally, becoming this type of people requires that we acknowledge and seek forgiveness for the times when we have rejected our cornerstone, when we have chosen not to follow our Good Shepherd. We're not perfect. There are times in each of our lives when we have resisted God's call. Peter knew this fact all-too-well while preaching before the crowd. My guess is that's part of the reason why his preaching proved so powerful and why Israel's leaders were so determined to silence him, because everyone gathered there that day could see just how committed he was to following Jesus, that Jesus was his cornerstone, that he would spend the rest of his life seeking to feed Jesus' sheep. As we end this time of worship and go from this place, my hope and prayer is that everyone we meet and minister to, both within this faith community and in the midst of our daily lives, might see the same faith and dedication in us as was in Peter. That we might demonstrate in all that we do and say that Jesus is our cornerstone and our Good Shepherd. And that we desire that others follow Jesus as well, from whatever vantage point that may be. Amen.