



.....Lent 2024 at North Lake.....

The eloquent poetry of Ecclesiastes 3 begins: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Then the lines represent the rhythm of birth and death, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, keeping silence and speaking, and more. Verse 5 contains a line that always puzzled me a bit, at least until I traveled to the Holy Land:

“A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together.”

Unlike Florida, the biblical landscape is filled with stones. The ancient Israelites used stones for weapons, executions, milling grain, raising walls, and erecting memorials and temples. Moses delivered the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. Tunnels and aqueducts were cut through rock. When you visit the Holy Land, you notice the prevalence of stones in every direction. It is no wonder stones are mentioned frequently in scripture.

For the Sundays of Lent, through Holy Week and all the way to the Sunday after Easter, we will “gather stones together,” that is, we’ll gather passages of scripture that refer to stones. They are so numerous in the Bible that we cannot cover them all. But stones will be our theme. We will see how the writers of scripture used stones both literally and figuratively. They are prominent in many stories, some of which you may not have noticed previously.

It may help to differentiate stone and rock. Most often in scripture, rock denotes bedrock or an unmovable rock formation. The psalms often speak of the Lord as our rock, our refuge and salvation. Jesus spoke about building a house on rock instead of sand. And he renamed Simon as Peter (in Greek **petros** or “rock”), saying that he could build the church on Peter’s faith and leadership. Generally, a stone indicates something smaller than a rock. A stone can be moved and put to some use. Stones may be small enough to be lifted and thrown. Or they may be colossal stones quarried, moved, and shaped for the construction of the temple. Our Lenten theme will focus on stones rather than rocks. This will be a time to gather stones together.

I appreciate Pastor Shawn’s help with week 5 (“Five Smooth Stones”) and other staff members who have helped to shape this Lenten series and to produce this guide. I’m also grateful to our many volunteers who hand out stones, lead worship music to inspire us, host and facilitate discussion groups, and so much more. Hopefully you can use these weekly pages for a deeper experience of Lent. Sign up for a group and invite others to join you in conversation after the messages, using the suggested questions. Have fun, but please, no throwing stones!

Jeff

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Hosmer

Lent I – The Cornerstone

Accompanying the message on February 18, 2024

Modern cornerstones are often ornamental or symbolic, above ground, bearing an inscription of the year of construction. There might be a plaque with more information about the building. Some cornerstones are even equipped with a hollow cavity to place a time capsule.

While I served a congregation in suburban Cincinnati, we observed the church's fiftieth anniversary. The cornerstone for the original sanctuary contained a time capsule. As part of our celebration, we opened the capsule to find an assortment of items from 1947 when the church was chartered soon after World War II. We also asked the congregation for suggestions about what to put into the time capsule for when it would be opened again in another twenty-five or fifty years. The cornerstone capsule was more than an historical curiosity, it was an expression of the congregation's identity and faith in Jesus Christ.

If you are a stone mason or have worked on a building project from the ground up, you understand the architectural importance of a cornerstone. Historically, the cornerstone was the first stone laid at the base of the foundation, establishing the corner angle and lines to form the front and one side of the building. In some cultures, the cornerstone ceremony is more important than a ground-breaking event. The cornerstone is the starting-point for all that follows and for everything erected above it.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- 1) Have you ever attended a ground-breaking, a cornerstone ceremony, or the dedication of a building? If so, what was the occasion and what do you remember? If it was a cornerstone-laying ceremony, was the cornerstone at the base of the foundation (eventually underground) or visible above-ground? If you have not personally attended a cornerstone ceremony, what did you think about the description and photos from the cornerstone ceremony for the health clinic in Madzimaera, Mozambique?
- 2) Isaiah 28 contains a lengthy indictment of the Jewish leaders, including priests and prophets. In this midst of that judgment is verse 16:

*Therefore, thus says the Lord God,
"See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation."*

This suggests God wanted to start all over again with a new foundation and construction project. How is that possible? How does that happen for a people and for individuals?

- 3) Do you know any stone masons, or have you ever observed one working? Stonemasonry is one of the oldest construction techniques. Master stonemasons know exactly what they want and how to prepare the stone for its position. In Psalm 118:22-23 the experts rejected the stone that God chose for the corner. Jesus quotes that verse (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17) following his parable of the wicked tenants to explain his own rejection. What was the reaction to this teaching of Jesus? How would you react?
- 4) What are the similarities and differences between a cornerstone ceremony and a baptism?
- 5) What does it mean for someone to declare Jesus as the cornerstone of his or her life? Is that an affirmation that you can make?

Lent 2– Raise Your Ebenezer

Accompanying the message on February 25, 2024

Last July the Yosemite National Park rangers began asking visitors NOT to build rock piles, also known as cairns. So many hikers had been stacking stones along the trails that it detracted from the natural setting. The growing number of cairns defied the “leave no trace” ethics of enjoying nature and leaving it undisturbed for others. In some parks and places, cairns are critical to mark a path; they are created and maintained by rangers and trail managers. But in Yosemite they are not needed or desirable. So, the rangers were trying to educate visitors to leave the stones scattered on the ground and to knock over any cairns they see.

Piling up stones is one of the most primitive expressions of human creativity. Mounds or pillars of stones were used in ancient cultures around the world. A heap or stack of stones could be used as a landmark, a directional guide, a burial mound, or a free-standing column to convey a sacred meaning. In the Old Testament, Hebrew leaders used stones to mark important occasions and ceremonies, especially moments when they felt the presence and power of God.

In 1 Samuel 7:5-14, Samuel the judge of Israel gathered the people and inspired a renewed faith and commitment to the Lord God. While they were all together, the Philistines heard about the gathering and advanced to attack. But God intervened and helped the Israelites against the Philistines. Afterward, Samuel selected a stone and erected it as a memorial, calling it Ebenezer, which means “*stone of help*,” to credit the Lord and to remember his aid.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- 1) Have you ever piled stones or used stones intentionally in a garden? What did that activity or artistry mean for you?
- 2) In Joshua 4:1-9 the Israelites crossed the Jordan River after forty years of wilderness wandering. The new leader Joshua ordered the placement of stones in the riverbed as a memorial. The stones reminded them of God’s help and testified for generations to come. The twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel, were piled to be visible above the normal water level, and the author of Joshua notes the stones were still in place when he wrote.
 - a. What different memorials have you visited? What impact did they have on you?
 - b. What memorials today testify to God’s help?
- 3) Consider the second verse of the old hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

Here I **raise my Ebenezer**;
hither by thy help I’m come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;
he, to rescue me from danger,
interposed his precious blood.

- a. What do you think the author meant when he wrote: “Here I raise my Ebenezer”?
- b. When or how have you raised an Ebenezer?

Lent 3 – A Heap of Witness

Accompanying the message on March 3, 2024

Last week we observed how stones were used to mark places and events in which the people felt God's presence, help, and protection. Stones were also set up or piled to signify and seal an agreement. The Old Testament features two excellent examples.

In Genesis 31:43-54, Jacob and Laban reached an agreement concerning Jacob's marriage to Laban's daughters and their future relationship. To finalize the agreement they heaped a pile of stones and also set up a monolith, a large stone pillar. Laban said, "*This heap is a witness between you and me today.*" They also called the pillar Mizpah, which means watchpost or watchtower. The stones served as a witness, a reminder of their agreement and accountability.

In Joshua 24:19-28, the people of Israel under Joshua's leadership renewed their covenant with God. Their ceremony at Shechem included the erection of a stone that would serve as a witness to their promises. The stone would stand as a remembrance of the covenant and their accountability to God's statutes and ordinances.

Stones were featured in the early development of contract law because they are dense, durable, and weighty. They symbolized something of massive importance, something that should be lasting and binding. Instead of leaves, feathers, or some other organic debris, the stones were selected and identified as witnesses because they conveyed permanence and significance.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- 1) Consider what agreements or contracts you have made in your life: for example, purchasing a car or house, taking a loan, accepting a job, getting married, and so forth. What steps are taken to secure the agreement, to indicate the durable nature of the promises made, and to hold parties accountable?
- 2) When have you been required to have witnesses or to get something notarized? What was the occasion? What were you doing that required someone else to observe and attest to your promise or signing? How does the current practice resemble what the ancients were doing by setting up stones?
- 3) In the traditional wedding vows, a bride and groom pledge to take each other and to be a faithful spouse. They make their vows "before God and these witnesses." So those who attend the ceremony are acknowledged as witnesses to the promises made by a husband and wife. That is intended to add weight, significance, and gravity to the moment. It is not merely an agreement between two people; it also involves God and the community surrounding the marriage. What would you think if a bride and groom, instead of lighting a unity candle, spent a moment up front building a cairn or setting up a stone that would symbolize their commitment?
- 4) In what ways do landmarks like the Washington Monument, the Statue of Liberty, Mt Rushmore, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier function like the stone witnesses and memorials from the pages of scripture?

Lent 4 – Stones of Law

Accompanying the message on March 10, 2024

The weight and durability of stones also made them an excellent medium for delivering the Ten Commandments. Exodus 31:18 explains, “*When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.*” The story got more complicated when Moses descended the mountain to find that his brother Aaron had conspired with the people to cast the idolatrous image of a golden calf.

Moses in his fury threw down the tablets of stone and broke them. You can read all the drama in Exodus 32 and 33. Eventually, he needed to climb Mount Sinai again for a “do-over” and a duplicate set of tablets. The Lord wrote again on the tablets “the words of the covenant, the ten commandments” (Exo. 34:28). Moses returned to the people, glowing from his encounter with the holy Lawgiver, and carrying the precious stones that symbolized their covenant with God.

The Law turned out to be both a blessing and a burden. It was a blessing in so far as it shaped them as a people, set an ethical standard, and enhanced their community and nation as they observed God’s Law. However, over the centuries of the Old Testament, the application of the Law also became a burden, as different interpreters introduced more and more nuances and implications that shackled the people. By the time of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees were known for their strict application to the Law of Moses.

The Law was also applied punitively, including stoning someone to death. It was a severe, grim, and physical execution, carried out by many people casting stone upon stone upon stone upon the bloodied offender. Then the stones of Law carried the weight of judgment without mercy.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- 1) The Israelites were known as a people of the Law with an impressive ethical foundation and accountability to God. The stone tablets with engraved commandments were considered sacred; they were carried and protected in the Ark of the Covenant.
 - a. What is the function and effectiveness of the Law for us today?
 - b. How has the system of legislation and justice changed over the years to our time?
- 2) The title of our Lenten series is based on Ecclesiastes 3:5, which reads: “*a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together.*” The Hebrew verb for *throw away* is the same word used to describe Moses throwing the tablets from his hands and breaking them (Exo. 32:19). So, the action of throwing away stones was not merely a neutral scattering, not just a matter of disposal. It refers to the action of throwing stones intentionally, perhaps even in the execution of someone who has violated the Law. How do you interpret this line about a suitable time for throwing and gathering stones?
- 3) John 8:2-11 tells about the woman caught in adultery and those ready to stone her. Notice Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Interestingly, the stone tablets delivered by Moses were “written with the finger of God.” What do you think Jesus was writing on the ground? How did Jesus’ handling of the “stones of Law” steer our Christian faith in a direction different from the time of Moses?

Lent 5 – Five Smooth Stones

Accompanying the message on March 17, 2024

Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

1 Samuel 17:40

Shepherds were seen as one of the lowest professions and a task reserved for the people of least importance in society. In the story of David versus Goliath, God gives victory over the enemy to the young shepherd instead of a king or mighty warrior.

1. Have you ever been through a humbling experience that made you rethink your position of importance in life? Write about that experience and how it made you feel at the time. What do you think about that moment today? Would you share that story with others?

2. In the Bible we read how God often uses simple things and overlooked people to accomplish huge things. When you encounter something that humbles you in life, can you think about how God might use this to do something big? Why or why not?

3. Goliath was an arrogant God-hating warrior committed to humiliating the people of God and destroying as many of them as he could touch. Today, a Goliath can be a thought, temptation, or system that is arrogant God-hating with a commitment to humiliate and destroy us.
 - a. Are you able to identify the Goliath in your life?
 - b. Do you trust that God will use “five smooth stones” to help take down your Goliath?

Prayer:

Lord, reveal the Goliaths in my life and teach me to trust that you will bring these giants down.

Amen

Lent 2024 – Conclusion

We are glad you have shared this Lenten season with us, a time for gathering of stones, or passages that reflect the prevalence of stones in the biblical world. Hopefully, with some new insights and conviction you can claim Jesus as THE CORNERSTONE of your life. We build upon Jesus as the foundation. The season of Lent always leads into Holy Week and points to the Cross and the Resurrection. These are the weighty, durable truths God has given us to ponder, affirm, and celebrate.

Most of the North Lake discussion groups are slated to meet for the five weeks of Lent but not during Holy Week. However, you'll notice our worship theme carries through Sunday, April 7. Even in the events of Jesus' final week you can find mention of stones. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, after Jewish authorities asked him to quiet his disciples, he replied, *"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out"* (Luke 19:40). Then on the night of his last supper and betrayal, when Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray, he withdrew from his disciples *"about a stone's throw"* (Luke 22:41). The next day, on *"the stone pavement"* Jesus stood before Pilate and faced the people's condemnation and heard the verdict of crucifixion (John 19:13-16). And on Easter we celebrate the Rolling Stone, you know the one that was rolled away to reveal the empty tomb (See Matthew 27:60 – 28:2).

Our series concludes with the reminder that we are all called to be Living Stones, (1 Peter 2:4-5), chosen, precious, and built into the house that God is creating. Every time we assemble for worship or fellowship or mission or something else as a church, it is *"a time to gather stones together!"*



A Time to Gather Stones Together

Lent 2024 at North Lake

Worship schedule

| Date | Calendar | Scripture | Message | Pastor |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------|
| February 18 | Lent 1 | Psalm 118:22 Mark 12:1-12 | “The Cornerstone” | Jeff |
| February 25 | Lent 2 | 1 Samuel 7:12 Joshua 4:1-10 | “Raise Your Ebenezer” | Jeff |
| March 3 | Lent 3 | Genesis 31:43-54 Joshua 24:19-28 | “A Heap of Witness” | Jeff |
| March 10 | Lent 4 | Exodus 31:18 John 8:2-11 | “Stones of Law” | Jeff |
| March 17 | Lent 5 | 1 Samuel 17 | “Five Smooth Stones” | Shawn |
| March 24 | Palm Sunday | Luke 19:40 Psalm 96 | “Shouting Stones” | Jeff |
| March 28 | Maundy Thursday | John 13:1-17; 31b-35 | “The Stone of Agony” | Liz |
| March 29 | Good Friday | Seven Last Words | Music, prayers, silent reflection | Shawn |
| March 31 | Easter | Matthew 27:60 – 28:2 John 11:38-41 | “Rolling Stones” | Jeff |
| April 7 | Easter 2 | 1 Peter 2:4-5 Ezekiel 36:26 | “Living Stones” | Jeff |

Lenten Prayer:

Almighty God, please use this season of Lent and Holy Week to draw me closer to you so that my faith will have the weight and durability of the stones that tell your story. Thank you for loving me even in my weakness and failures. My hope and trust are in your wisdom, providence, and grace, all displayed in Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone of my life. Amen.