

Cat Goodrich
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
May 10, 2020

Living Stones

1 Peter 2:1-10, John 14:1-14

The backseat of my family's white Chrysler grand caravan had two deep storage compartments on either side, that served as the armrests. For some reason, one of them was filled with flat rocks, flecked with shimmering mica, taken over the years from the stream at Montreat and stashed away for safekeeping. On the long drive home each summer, I would hold those rocks, sorting them by size and shape and sparkle, admiring their weighty beauty, and remembering the icy water I'd pulled them from – how it felt rushing over my toes, the sound and smell of it imbedded deeply in my memory as I held the granite.

I have no one to blame but myself that my daughters, too, have a fascination with beautiful and unusual rocks. They fill their pockets with pebbles and create ever expanding collections in various boxes – though not in the car, yet. Our first retreat with you all, I chased baby Maddie all over Living River as she said *Rock, rock*, picking up fistfuls of gravel and decided which ones she might try to eat. We've been painting rocks in these days of isolation, intending to leave them for others to find in our neighborhood, in parks, on trails around the city. I can remember our delight when we happened upon this rock in the middle of a path on Boston Common, and others we've found and treasured through the years.

It's hard to think of something more ordinary than a rock. They are everywhere, as anyone who has tried to dig a new garden during these weeks at home can tell you. They can be enormous, like the boulders at Moss Rock Preserve, or tiny, like the pea gravel on the wooded part of the Jemison Trail. They're easy to ignore, until a shard finds its way into your shoe, or you stumble on a stone in the middle of the path.

Rocks are ordinary, but it seems like ordinary things have taken on more significance these days. Trips we took for granted three months ago have become rare for many – trips to the grocery store to buy food, going out to eat, even going to work or to school... ordinary outings have become extraordinary in this time of pandemic, as we seek to stay home to stop the

spread of the illness. As a result, the things we took for granted are taking on new meaning and significance.

I'm more aware now of how precious time with extended family can be, since it seems uncertain when it will be safe to travel across state lines, or when grandparents can safely visit with grandchildren, or adult children can see and hug their elderly parents. Our sacred space, though far from ordinary, has taken on new significance for me since we cannot worship safely there, and likely will not be able to before we move – no matter what the governor says. When is the next time we'll be able to hear a choir of voices joined in song, their sound soaring up to the rafters?

Part of being human is attempting to make meaning in the midst of changed circumstances. We are certainly doing that right now. We're sifting through our work lives, our days of retirement, our parenting practices, our church programs, and asking – what is essential? What do we want to hold on to, and of what do we need to let go?

This is the story of God's people! We Presbyterians are people reformed and always being reformed. Ongoing transformation, creation and re-creation, of what work and worship look like, what they feel like. Continually seeking to answer the question: how do we live faithfully, here and now? What new thing is being born in and through us? What work is God calling us to?

The Hebrew Bible tells the story of the people of Israel, liberated from captivity in Egypt but without a homeland, wandering, wondering how they would survive. It tells of how Moses struck a rock to bring forth clean water in the desert. How God provided for them when they had nothing else.

It tells us also of God's people in exile, crying out for help, wondering how to sing songs of salvation in a strange land. What does worship look like when it must happen behind closed doors? Or after the central place of worship, the temple, has been destroyed? Mealtimes become sacramental; a family gathered around a dinnertable lights candles, tells stories, and says prayers to mark the beginning of the Sabbath – together, at home.

The stories of our faith show us cycles of captivity and liberation, testifying to God's work throughout history to save and to free. The Christian story is

one of living, dying, and rising again; which makes sense, because birth, death, and rebirth is the stuff life is made of.

Christ's words to his disciples, *do not let your hearts be troubled*, are particularly powerful for me, because there is so much that troubles my heart these days. They're words I've spoken many times at a graveside, with red Alabama clay clutched in my hand. It helps to remember Jesus says this with the specter of the cross and the shadow of death looming large over him, though the disciples don't know that yet. He says it to reassure them that their relationship with him will not end with his death. To remind them that God is bigger, God's love stronger even than death. To encourage them to trust that God is still present and at work, even when the worst thing we can imagine happens.

Peter writes to offer encouragement also, to an early Christian community experiencing shame and rejection because of their beliefs. Peter tells them that the shame of their current context is not what God intends for them. He uses all sorts of wonderful metaphors, calling Christ the stone rejected by people but precious to God, the stone that therefore has become the chief cornerstone. So, Peter writes, "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house..."

Stones are cold and lifeless, hard and heavy. But though it is hard, rock is moldable. The persistent rush of the Colorado River carved the Grand Canyon, just as surely as the flow of flat rock creek in Montreat smoothed out the stones I loved as a child, the ones my children treasure now. As hard headed, or occasionally hard hearted though we might be, God the creator, the master builder, is at work shaping us into the people we are meant to be. By the love of Christ, we are made into living testaments to God's grace and goodness.

In this time of crisis, when we cannot gather together in our sanctuary, what would it look like for us to be living stones? If we let the lifegiving breath of God and the love of Christ make each one of us into a spiritual house, a home for God, wherever we are. The bedrock values of our particular community of God's people are a firm foundation upon which to build. After all, we are First Presbyterian Church, a home in the heart of the city. We build on the truth that we are blessed and beloved children of God, loved not because we are good but because God is good. Wherever we are, we are people who welcome all whom God welcomes – which means all are

welcomed and valued. However we worship, worship lifts our spirits and the needs of the people meet the power of God. We are a people who courageously speak up about God's love and desire for justice. Who reach out across differences to invite others in, and who build bridges in a fractured world to serve and be in relationship with each other, with people experiencing homelessness, with college students, and with those on the margins.

No matter where are, the God who raised Christ from the dead is still at work, breathing life into our scattered community – joining together the living stones of our lives, building us into the church in the world. Thanks be to God!