

ORDER OF SERVICE FOR SUNDAY, MAY 10, 2020
FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER/CHRISTIAN FAMILY SUNDAY

BEFORE WE WORSHIP, WE REFLECT...

In today's readings we find huge emotional contrasts: the grinding rage and hatred which resulted in the stoning to death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen; the psalmist's cry of distress and confidence in God's power to save; a letter of encouragement to a persecuted community; and Jesus speaking in words that offer both comfort and challenge. The image of "living stones" from the epistle lifts up these contrasts. The word "living" connotes all that is vibrant, dynamic, moving and alive. The word "stone" usually conjures up images of things that are solid, impenetrable, inflexible and ancient. The phrase "living stones" carries a sense that life in Christ will be both as solid and dependable as a rock yet fresh and full of potential as a newborn baby. The metaphor is rich with emerging layers.

To be "living stones" and not become rigid or immovable in our beliefs is a challenge today's readings present to us. We and our institutions must live and breathe with the vitality of God's Spirit or we will become destroyers of the very life we claim to promote. Ours is a living tradition that is always calling itself to grow and explore the fullness of relationship with God – source of all our living and being.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

CALL TO WORSHIP

Creator, parent of the human family,

we gather to worship you.

In baptism, we are called beloved children of God, as such,

we gather to worship you.

Friends, neighbours, siblings in faith,

**we gather to worship in song, in prayer, in readings from your story/our story,
in thoughts and reflections.**

Let us worship God.

CENTERING PRAYER

God, creator of us all, we gather to worship you. We come as individuals, we come in family units, we come as neighbours and friends. We come here where we are known by name, welcomed with all our fragilities and strengths. We gather with kindred spirits who long to live faithful to your calling. Guide us, inspire us, challenge us, comfort us, and nurture us in this time of worship so that we might be enabled to return to our daily lives ready to engage fully with all of your creation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

O God of story, in the beginning you created humankind. The Bible contains your story of love and encouragement and challenge, to your creation, to your children, and to us. Today, may our hearts and minds be open to hear what your Spirit is saying to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

READINGS AND PSALM

Acts 7:55-60

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles to serve tables so that the apostles could be free to serve the word (Acts 6:1-6). Stephen does more than distribute food, however. For his preaching of God's word, he becomes the first martyr of the faith.

⁵⁵Filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Into your hands, O LORD, I commend my spirit. (Ps. 31:5)

¹In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.

²**Incline your ear to me; make haste to deliver me.**

³Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold; for the sake of your name, lead me and guide me.

⁴**Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, for you are my tower of strength.**

⁵Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O LORD, God of truth.

¹⁵**My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.**

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love."

1 Peter 2:2-10

Christ is the cornerstone of God's saving work and the foundation of our lives. We are God's chosen, holy people who continuously celebrate and declare the mercy of God we experience through Jesus Christ.

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Gospel: John 14:1-14

On the night that he is to be arrested, Jesus shares final words with his disciples. As the one through whom God is known, he promises to go before them and act on their behalf.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

⁸Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

SERMON

Once upon a little planet, a nice provincial planet set deep in the galactic sticks, there lived an interesting thing called humans. Humans had two legs and two convictions: one they called luck, which they believed in when things went right. The other one they used when things went wrong. This was called religion.

Although humans had two ears, they rarely listened, and, if they did, they only liked to hear promises, estimates of their own value, congratulations, and, above all, expressions of gratitude. Of course, some humans were different... thinkers, revolutionaries, saints,... but these were few, and they were quickly crucified, shot, or poisoned.

Such goes part of a poem by a poet whose name escapes me, but whose prophetic words do not. In particular the last verse holds much truth, for it expresses the realistic end to many Christians on this earth -- they are not to be tolerated. The truth is far too frightening.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an unwelcomed message. In countries where the government holds people in bondage, Christians are killed because they proclaim liberation. In this country, there is a struggle between those who proclaim grace and those who proclaim works; between those who live to gain much for themselves, and those who live to gain much for others. The Gospel of Christ is an unwelcomed message. It is a stumbling block to those centered on the self.

But we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. We rely, not on luck, but on trust in a gracious and loving God. We rely, not on ourselves, but on each other and on the power of the Holy Spirit. We are Christians, not by our choosing, but by God's naming. We also cannot be individual in our Christianity for we are all baptized into the body of Christ. When one goes off on a separate path, suddenly the rest of the body is no longer whole. Indeed, we can stumble.

We are the Church. The Church is not a building. The Church is the believing people of God. We are connected, not by thinking and believing the same things, behaving the same way, but trusting in the salvation given us through Christ. This is what binds us together. On our own, we can claim nothing.

I am sad when people swear that the roof of the church would fall in if they stepped foot inside the building. They are unable to see that it is not the building that threatens to crumble, but the community of Christ. Not the physical structure that is threatening their demise, but the unfilled needs of the spirit that leads to a void in one's life. For what is proclaimed but the Gospel of Christ which affirms them, reminds them, prods them with the promise that we are God's people, selfishly guarded and nourished by the Almighty, that where once we walked in darkness, now we walk in the light of God's mercy through Christ. As a person of faith, I have difficulty understanding the reasons why people would choose not to have this gift of wholeness in their lives!!

Maybe it's a 'guilt thing'. Perhaps they have done something horrible, totally revolting, or just plain ridiculous that they believe is unforgivable. Or perhaps, in the proclamation of the Gospel, they feel a twinge, a nudge that reminds them of grudges buried deep, prejudices festering, anger seething, sadness or depression stagnating. And in that moment of human vulnerability before God, they choose to crawl back into

themselves and hide, rather than confess, be absolved, and know the joy of forgiveness and liberation from the bondage of sin. In their fear of facing themselves, they stumble over the very One who can make them whole. The Gospel of Christ, for some, can seem such a dangerous, exposing Word.

Christianity is not a closed-door affair. We are called to go out and proclaim the mighty deeds that God has done for us in our lives, through Jesus Christ. We are called to invite into our presence those who do not know of the cornerstone of faith, and share the Gospel message. We are called to pray for them, walk with them, surround them with love, caring and sharing. We are called to throw away all things within us that would hurt or harm, separate or exclude. We are called to hold each other accountable, so that the church remains solid, in plumb with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people; once we had not received mercy, now we have received mercy. Go. Proclaim this message with your lives. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Build us up, mothering God, as living stones united in your spiritual house. Continually strengthen your church as it is sent forth to proclaim your love. We pray especially for new congregations and those in redevelopment. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Humble us, creator God, as part of your creation. Fill us with respect and awe for the world you have made, including volcanoes, ocean currents, tropical rainstorms, glaciers, and other forces that both destroy and create. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Align our ways to your love, O God. We pray for countries, leaders, and other organizations as they prepare places for those seeking refuge and safety. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of healing and rest, help those whose hearts are heavy and weighed down by many troubles. Comfort their suffering, ease their distress, and carry their burdens. We pray for all those affected by the shootings in Nova Scotia and for victims of violence everywhere. We pray for all the front-line and essential workers of this pandemic and for their families. Give them strength, courage and a renewed sense of purpose in a medical situation that seems unending. We pray for the families of all those who have died from the corona virus. Embrace them with your love and grant them inner peace. We bring before you our family members, friends and community members who are in need of your peace and healing hand at this time: Mike Froese; Brooke Alexiuk; Abbie; Tracy Skoglund; Carolyn & Douglas; Don; Amber; Nicole; Gordon Dreger; Scott Brown; Diane Dreger; the family of Lottie Siemans; Elizabeth & David. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer

Nurturing God, we pray for those who tend and teach young children, for the safe pregnancies of expectant parents, and for families who struggle with infertility and miscarriage. We give thanks for all who have shown mothering care, and we remember all for whom this day is difficult. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Generous God, you call into your brilliant light all who have died. Give us faith to take hold of the promise of your eternal life. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord.

Amen

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION

May the Christ who walks with wounded feet, walk with you to the end of the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands, teach you to serve one another.

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart, be your love forever.

And as you begin to re-enter the world, may you see the face of Jesus in everyone you meet, and may everyone you meet + see the face of Jesus in you. Amen.

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