

## **“Cornerstone”**

### **Sermon – May 3, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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Stone has been part of humanity ever since there was humanity. Humans built shelters from it and tools. In fact, making stone tools is a hallmark of being human. Even today, we still use stone as foundational construction material as well as other uses, such as grave stones. The first two lectionary passages today deal with stones, though in different ways.

Today’s epistle lesson is again from 1 Peter, this week from chapter 2. Again, the intended audience are Gentile Christ-worshipping congregations in what today is Turkey. They are the minorities in their communities and struggling.

And in today’s passage the author quotes from the prophets Isaiah and Hosea and Psalm 118. And they involve a lot of stones.

To start, the author invites his audience in verse 4, “Come to him (Jesus), a living stone... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” While it may sound a bit strange to our modern ear, in antiquity objects that were perceived as firmly rooted in the earth were often referred to as “living.”

He then somewhat quotes Isaiah 28:16 saying, “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious.”

A cornerstone is the critical first, largest, and most solid stone set at the corner of a foundation to unite two walls. Importantly, it is the one prepared and chosen for its exact 90° angle, which serves as the basis for the construction of the whole building. Choosing the right cornerstone is essential not only to the aesthetics of the building but also to its durability. It determines the entire structure's alignment, strength, and

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dimensions. It serves as the primary load-bearing component, ensuring stability and defining the building's accuracy.

In modern times, it often bears an inscription of the construction date and can serve as a repository for time capsules, symbolizing the foundation of the building.

Thus, the epistle is identifying Jesus as the corner stone that Isaiah prophesied and by which we should build our spiritual house upon. As somewhat paying homage to that, our church newsletter is entitled, “The Corner Stone.” This is a bit of play on words, reflecting us meeting metaphorically at the corner of Stone (Church) with Christ as our foundation in what we say and do.

Further in today’s passage, even though the stone has been rejected by others and they even stumble over it, God has expanded his chosen people to include the Gentiles, that is, to include all people.

Now, these days it has become commonplace to describe the coming Kingdom as a reality far removed from the plane of this world—someday, out there, up there.

But Peter’s letter has a different view. For him, the revelation of Christ was destined to happen in the midst of creation itself, and it was here that Christians were called to be a priestly community in anticipation of the event.

Thus, the church—whether then or now—like “living stones” must in all things resist the temptation to disparage this present world for some heavenly realm yet to come. The household of God is at once built on the spiritual cornerstone of Christ and rooted deeply in God's good

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creation. This leads to the promise of a new community realized as God restores God’s people and institutes God’s righteous rule.

The church is a spiritual community whose fundamental vocation is the proclamation of the good news, not only in word but also—and perhaps primarily—in deed.

Whether new to faith or long-time believers, the people of our congregations need to be grounded in their identity in Christ in ongoing ways.

Whatever their circumstances, they can derive a profound sense of hope from hearing that they too are God’s precious stones, built upon that living cornerstone.

They are God’s own possession and have been brought from darkness to light to offer spiritual sacrifices and to proclaim God’s wonderful acts of mercy.

1 Peter may be summed up, in brief: As Christ is, so is the Christian. As the church, this is our only calling, and our only hope.

But as a cautionary tale, while Jesus is our cornerstone, humans can use stones for other purposes.

Today’s story from Acts is about Stephen who was the first deacon.

Deacons were appointed to take care of the day-to-day needs of the people, so the apostles could focus on preaching.

But Stephen ended up being more of a preacher doing “great wonders and signs” and speaking with wisdom and the Holy Spirit. This got people upset and brought him before the religious leaders.

Stephen then gives a long rambling sermon. In fact, it is the longest sermon among Peter or Paul in Acts or even Jesus in Luke’s gospel.

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Principally, he is defending himself against charges of blasphemy and that it is the religious leaders that are the ones going against God.

Enraged, mob mentality takes over and as verse 58 says, “Then 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.” It will be a few chapters before this Saul, the persecutor, becomes the Paul, the apostle. But while having stones being hurled at him, Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

So much of Stephen’s end echoes that of Jesus. Preaching the gospel of peace and suffering violently for it.

The story is a stark reminder of the potential for violence in religiously influenced conflict. It's the kind of violence that the Bible does not allow us to disown entirely. Certainly, not historically.

Early Church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Athenagoras in the 2nd century, taught that Christians had abolished the sword and were committed to peace.

After Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity as the state religion of Rome in the fourth century, though, things began to change. Violence in the name of God became more prevalent, particularly in the last 1000 years.

And while we thought that had waned by the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after two world wars, we see it on the rise today with Christian Nationalism.

When did Jesus—or any of the early followers—ever take violent action against those who opposed their message? Never. They may have criticized those who opposed them but never took up arms against them.

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They promoted peace, healing and support for the poor and marginalized.

Yet, it is easy for all of us to get trapped in cycles of reactivity, eager to focus on our opponents, to prove we are right and that “they” are the blasphemers.

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazes into heaven at his end. Our gaze too often is fixed on those wrong-doers, or people who vote wrongly or misinterpret the Bible or bully others. We give them our power by focusing our energies on them, allowing them to completely occupy and preoccupy our gaze.

Stephen shows us another way. If, instead, we got curious about what God is up to in all of this, what might we see? If we turned our gaze to Jesus, what might we learn? What larger, more expansive vision of God’s redemptive life might we gain?

Eyes fixed on Jesus liberate our attention from those who wish to dominate it. Focused on Jesus, we are freed from blaming, defending, explaining or winning.

Instead, we focus on and promulgate the message of Jesus. Speaking and working toward peace, healing, and reconciliation is the way to protest against the injustices we see today.

None of us can do this with our own strength. Like Stephen, we rely on the power and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit to witness to the risen Christ in the ways that God has uniquely equipped and called each of us to do, which we can do only with Jesus Christ as our cornerstone.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.