

Immanuel United Church

May 7, 2023

Fifth Sunday of Easter

## **Prelude**

### **Acknowledgement of the Land and Treaties**

Today, we acknowledge the land that we are gathered on is Treaty 1 territory..... the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, and Dakota Peoples, as well as the homeland and the heart of the Red River Metis People, who for thousands of years, walked gently on this land with deeply rooted gifts of spirituality, culture and ways of knowing.

We respect the Treaties that were made on these territories, acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and give thanks for the connection we share with this land – in times past and also in the present day.

Today we are called to seek a new relationship as Indigenous and non-indigenous people, creating one based on friendship, built on respect, and one that produces peace, remembering that we are all treaty people.

***As we enter this time of worship,  
The rainbow candle is lit  
To symbolize and remind us  
Of the commitment that we have made  
To be an inclusive and affirming community  
And that all God's people belong here.***

## **Welcome and Announcements**

### **Lighting of the Christ Candle**

We long for the light of Christ.

**Our spirits are eager for its warmth.**

We seek the rays that surround us.

**Our misty morning is lifting.**

We brighten our day with the dawn of a fresh start.

**Our eyes catch glimpses of the son.**

We light the flame that reminds us that we are on Holy Ground.

**Our hearts are drawn to this everlasting source of love.**

### **Call to Worship**

All who come into this sanctuary are welcome.

**We are welcomed and find our place among God's people.**

All who enter will be blessed by the Divine.

**We are so blessed by Almighty God.**

All who give voice to their concerns will be heard.

**We give our burdens to the one who cares.**

All will find the love that we desire.

**We are loved just as we are. Praise God!**

### **Hymn MV#83    Let My Spirit Always Sing**

### **Opening Prayer**

In this time, dear God, we worship and praise your holy name. We give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ in our lives. Each day begins anew, and each moment is precious. We savour every blessing that we have. As we come before you this service, we pray that all we do will glorify you and bring joy where there is sadness and relief where there is pain. Help us to find strength and guidance as we listen to your voice and know that we have a mighty fortress. May our souls be filled with love as we join together as one. Amen.

### **Hymn VU#331    The Church's One Foundation**

## **Scripture Readings**

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

## **Choir Anthem    Canon of Praise**

### **Reflection– Living Stones**

Today I'd like to talk about stones, not the Stones, but plain ole' stones. We'll have to leave Mick and Keith for another time.

We see stones all around us and most of the time we don't give them much thought. But stones can also be very fascinating. Some people collect stones. Some can be quite pretty with unique shapes and colours. Stones serve many purposes and can be used in such varied ways such as construction and jewelry. Stones have also been used to make tools and weapons such as arrow heads in ancient times. Stones are multifaceted. Looking at the reading from Acts, the stone was not made into a weapon, it was the weapon. We all know that stones are very hard. If we got hit with one, it would do serious damage.

Talking about the stoning death of Christianity's first martyr seems like a dismal way to start the message for the fifth Sunday of Easter. And yet we find ourselves in the middle of the crowd who has thrown stones at Stephen. Who was Stephen? Here's a little background on this man who found himself in such dire straits.

When a dispute arose within the church regarding the daily distribution of food, the twelve disciples realized that they needed help administering the day-to-day operation of the church. They directed the church to select "seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom" for this

task. One of the men chosen was Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”.

“Stephen, full of faith and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people”. Members of the synagogue, finding that they could not hold their own in dialogue against Stephen, brought charges against Stephen that he was speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God”. People in power or those who think they know more than us, don’t like it when a smarty pants comes along and shows them up. Stephen was arrested and brought before the council or the Sanhedrin, where witnesses brought false charges against him.

Asked whether the charges were true, Stephen responded by preaching a sermon that recounted a good deal of Jewish history. He closed his sermon by accusing the assembled group, including the council, of being stiff-necked which means haughty or stubborn, opposing the Spirit, killing the Righteous One (Jesus), and failing to keep the law. As you can imagine this enraged the crowd and provoked Stephen’s stoning.

But we have no record of the council making any formal judgment against Stephen or imposing punishment. Verses 57-58 show the action moving very quickly in response to Stephen’s comment about seeing the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. What we have here is not legal sanction, but mob action. The rule of law broke down and council members (and others, surely) took the law into their own hands.

My research for today’s message found that the Saul mentioned in this passage is the very Paul (formerly named Saul) who later had his road to Damascus experience. Saul will later acknowledge his presence at Stephen’s stoning. He may have provided Luke (Paul’s traveling companion and the author of this book) with an eyewitness account of Stephen’s stoning.

No one pages through the New Testament without repeatedly reading about violent resistance. The story of Stephen gives us much to consider,

lest we forget the atrocities that are part of the Christian legacy—those inflicted upon people of faith, as well as those inflicted by them.

But if we dwell too intently on images of a smiley Stephen, all pious and cherub-like, we risk passing over the ugliness of a crowd crushing a man's skull, one hurled rock at a time.

If we make this passage only about Stephen, we might neglect to notice the stones littering the ground around us, which either implicate us or cause us to cry out for deliverance from cycles of violence.

Remember, the people who kill Stephen are neither the local hooligans nor the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to a cross. They are, ostensibly at least, upstanding members of religious communities: regular members of synagogues, elders, religious professionals, priests. They are guardians of vital traditions. They are important people who possess a lot of leverage in religious discourse, political discourse, too.

But why do these people go to such an extreme? Are they just terrible people? True, he issues some pointed accusations, and he challenges the theological basis for the centrality of the Jerusalem temple. But where did they ever get the idea that stoning was a justified response to anything?

And so another possibility emerges, one that makes us ask hard questions about a church history and a contemporary society replete with oppression and violence. How do these terrible tendencies of human society connect to a story about a cross and empty tomb? Does the Easter message, as we retell and re-enact it, merely give us one more example of humanity's propensity for violence? Does Easter give a warrant to hope for an end to bloodshed, or does it reiterate that faithfulness to the gospel will only provoke more of the same? More disturbing, does our Christian witness imitate what it suffers, by promising violent retribution for those who oppose the gospel?

If the Easter story means anything, it had better mean that God promises an end to this way of doing business. And that God can save us from ourselves.

After all this talk of stoning and violence we need to be reassured by the reading from Psalms. Here a rock is compared to a fortress, something that provides shelter and comfort.

There is an affirmation of trust in the reading from Psalms. After putting himself in the Lord's hands, the psalmist recalls that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of enemies. A "broad place" means a place of safety and security. The psalmist has put his life in the hand of One who had proved to be a rock, a fortress, a trusted guide and that One has proved to be faithful.

There is here—like in a number of psalms—so much talk about unspecified "enemies" and of people who have laid a trap for the psalmist. It does all sound vaguely paranoid and almost militant and, in this way, may feel like a far cry from our everyday experience.

Oh sure, we all have people who don't much care for us. And although we are called to love all people, we often return the favor of not caring much for the people who don't like us. And yes, in any given organization there are self-important people who might step all over you if that's what it takes to make themselves look better in other's eyes. These are the things we gnash our teeth over after work when sharing a glass of wine with a spouse. "She's driving me clean up a wall" we might say. "If I have to sit through one more meeting with that blowbag, I'm gonna lose it" we might say in the privacy of our home.

Still, we'd be hard pressed to call these people our mortal enemies, people who are plotting our very destruction the way the psalmists often seem to depict matters. These folks might make our lives a bit miserable now and then, but we'd never go so far as to say they are plotting to take our very life the way Psalm 31 claims.

And yet, I think we do have some very real foes that we need protection from. People battle daily with offenders who take both human and nonhuman forms. We need protection from addictions, greed, abuse, lack of self-esteem. These struggles, unfortunately, take lives daily and in that

sense, they are mortal enemies. In this passage from Psalms, God, our rock, is the fortress when these foes come knocking.

Metaphors abound in the passage from Peter! And no one metaphor captures everything there is to say about resurrection. Rather, they suggest different interpretative pathways forward to ponder and take up. One image worth considering in light of the rest is the metaphor of stones.

In verse 2 of 1 Peter chapter 2 the people were compared to newborn babies. Now they are living stones. Peter talks a lot about stones using some form of the Greek words lithos and petra. Some of those stones, he grieves, cause people to stumble. Other stones about which the apostle writes are what he calls “precious” or beautiful.

“Living water” is a more frequent metaphor —and easier to understand. We can visualize a mountain stream as living water as it splashes its way down the mountain. However, stones usually just stay where they are—inanimate. Right?

We know nothing of living stones—except, perhaps, for a coral reef still in the process of forming and yet, when I Googled living stones, I found that there is a plant called lithops which is a genus of succulent plants in the ice plant family. Members of the genus are native to southern Africa. The name is derived from the Ancient Greek words for 'stone' and 'face', referring to the stone-like appearance of the plants. They avoid being eaten by blending in with surrounding rocks and are often known as pebble plants or living stones.

1 Peter refers to Jesus as a living stone—an allusion to his resurrection—he is alive. The original readers of this letter—mostly Gentiles—had earlier worshiped idols made of inanimate stone—dead—lifeless—having no power to help them. They would surely understand the contrast between those dead idols and their living Christ.

Consider this irony. Peter speaks of Christ or petra as a living stone—and, in the next verse, will speak of his readers as living stones. However, Peter uses

a different word for rock here—lithos—the same word that Jesus used when talking about the stone that the builders rejected.

Now Peter tells these new Christians that God has chosen to build them up “as a spiritual house”—as the temple of God. Note that each of these Christians is a living stone, so there are many of them. The spiritual house into which they have been built, however, is one—the church. The many living stones constitute one spiritual house—a community.

Then there are stones that cause us to stumble. The idea of a stumbling stone was particularly vivid in that part of the world, where the land was rocky. At best, the person who stumbled would suffer a sore toe or knee. At worst, they would stumble in battle and be rendered helpless in the face of his enemy.

Hiking is a kind of art form. After all, people who do it well manage, among other things, to keep a watchful eye on both what’s on the ground on which they walk and what’s above that ground. Artful hikers understand that there is generally much that has the potential to both trip up and lift up hikers.

It’s difficult to keep a simultaneous eye on both the ground and what’s above it. We either focus so closely on the ground in an effort not to stumble over anything on it or on what’s above and around us in an attempt to see all its beauty. But such focus leaves us prone to focusing so closely on either the ground that we overlook the beauty around or on the beauty that surrounds us that we overlook potential stumbling stones.

Not only do we need to be aware of our own stumbling stones, but we are implored not to create stumbling stones for others. That cause of others’ spiritual stumbling stands in stark contrast to the purposes for which God chooses Jesus’ followers.

The book of Nehemiah contains one of the closest references to “living stones” or “stones of life” in the Old Testament. In the company of associates, one of Nehemiah’s opponents criticize attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem saying, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they



restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?”

In Nehemiah, a major focus is dispersion and return—themes that are also important in 1 Peter. Within this passage, imagery about stones is configured as demolition materials salvaged and repurposed for rebuilding the Holy City and site of God’s presence.

From this perspective, the “living stone” imagery may invite us to consider resurrection as a site of repurposed life and reconstruction. Resurrection life creates the environment to house and honor the presence of God within and beyond Christian communities.

This passage describes Jesus as a figure of both shame and honor. He is shamefully rejected by humans but honored by God as a chosen, valuable, and founding building block in God’s new creation.

Today’s Easter reading from 1 Peter invites us to entertain the possibility that resurrection life is so profound, aspects of it are captured in the images of the mundane—from rocks, milk, darkness, light, and growth—as well as in the images of the magnificent—from iconic edifices, precious stones, and newborn babies. We only need have the courage and imagination to play with interpretations, exploring the vast possibilities of resurrection in this season.

My pray is that the image of stones will open the door to all kinds of wonderful aspects of our life with God. May we find ourselves compared to Living Stones not stumbling stones, not weapons to be hurled in anger, but living stones that have been refurbished for God’s work. God is our rock, Jesus our cornerstone and the Holy Spirit is the breath that keeps us alive. Amen.

**Hymn VU#670    Precious Lord, Take My Hand**

## **Offering VU#540            Grant Us, God, the Grace**

Grant us, God, the grace of giving,  
with a spirit large and free,  
that ourselves and all our living  
we may offer faithfully.

## **Offering Prayer**

There are many ways that we can serve you, dear God. At this time, we bring these offerings before you to be used for the work of this church. Bless all those who give not only financially, but with their talents, their time, their prayers, their friendships. We are truly blessed with caring people who freely give love that takes so many forms. Guide us all with wisdom to be the instruments that you need as we use all the gifts provided to your service. Amen.

## **Prayers of the People**

As we think about the living stones, O God, we realize that there are times when transformation is vital. We pray that as we commune with you, we will have a deeper understanding of the change that is needed in our hearts, our church, our city, and our world. Help us to take what seems like a lifeless and perhaps useless stone and turn it into something that will further your work. We pray that as we examine ourselves and this church, we will envision so much potential.

We pray for the weather changes that have affected our country and the world. Flooding has taken the lives of people in Quebec; forest fires are raging in Alberta already. Help us to take climate change seriously and support those who are directly affected by these disasters.

There are so many in our country who don't have enough for their basic needs. Help us to get to the root of these issues. We pray for living wages that sustain everyone. We don't want anyone left behind.

Help those who are living with the conflict in Sudan. We know that this country has suffered enough. Innocent lives are getting caught in the middle. Be with them and those who are trying to intervene.

As we bring our concerns to you, compassionate One, we feel your touch. Bring comfort and strength to those among us who are sick, feeling down, worried, angry. We know that we can lay our burdens at your feet, and you will understand.

In a moment of silence, we bring our unspoken prayers....

Let us pray as Jesus taught us to pray...

### **Prayer of Jesus**

### **Hymn MV#92    Like a Rock**

### **Commissioning and Benediction**

As a pebble makes ripples on the water, so let us make ripples in our daily lives. We are living stones ready to be repurposed. We have the power of God Almighty on our side. We are blessed with the Holy Spirit and Christ will lead the way.

With each stumble we know that our forgiving Divine parent is there to hold us steady. We have a rock to cling to. Thank God we are not alone as we face each of life's challenges. Be assured that we have a safe harbour as old as time. Amen.