

Sermon: The Chief Cornerstone

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 24, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Back in the days when pioneers were expanding to the Old West. Over the Oregon trail on the eastern slope of the Rockies, there was a stream, a bit too wide to hop across in one step. Someone came up with a simple solution by placing a rock, a ugly lump of stone in the middle of the stream, so others can ‘two-stepped’ across.

Years passed as people began to settle in that area, a man built his cabin near that same stream. He had a problem—his door flapped in the wind. To solve it, he transported that ugly lump of rock, in the middle of the stream back to his cabin. It became a door stop.

More years passed, and more people pushed west. Railroads were built across the country, cities sprang up. A nephew of the old pioneer came to visit his uncle. That old ugly lump of rock, propping up his uncle’s door caught his attention. This nephew happened to study geology at a large university, so he chipped away a small corner, and lo and behold, what emerged out of that ugly exterior shell was a lump of pure gold—the largest gold nugget ever to have been discovered this side of the Rockies!

A rock that had been there for generations, a rock that some saw as heavy, some saw as ugly, some saw as lumpy, but only the nephew saw it for what it really was—a nugget of pure gold. Isn’t that also true of Jesus? The same Jesus whom many see as a stumbling block, as a rejected stone, is actually precious—**the chief cornerstone.**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today is Palm Sunday. It is a day in the Christian calendar we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Our Scriptural reading of John 12 contains a somewhat abbreviated version of that entry, as compared to the other Gospels. There is no elaborate and sometimes puzzling plot to ‘borrow’ a donkey; people still waved the palm branches, but they don’t lay their cloaks on the ground. I guess the more important part remains, they do quote the Scriptures, specifically Psalm 118, *“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”*

The meaning of this entry of Jesus is clear. It is clear from both parties—from the people and from Jesus. The people expected a king, not a conquering king riding on horseback, for they already have that with Rome, and it brought them misery and oppression. No, the people wanted a Messianic King, in the best of the Jewish tradition—a king who comes in the name of the Lord God, who is to usher in a kingdom of justice and peace. And Jesus happily obliged. He came sitting on a donkey's colt, symbolically projecting this coming of the Messianic King, in accordance to Zechariah 9:9, "*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!*" I have in the past called it 'the finest political theatre', and I still stand by that statement.

However, the lofty expectation that Jesus projected onto the crowd, would soon be dashed, as not long after he would be betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve. Jesus would soon be arrested by the Jewish religious authority, tried by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Seeing that Jesus had committed no actual crime, Pilate had wanted to release him, somehow. So he gave the people a choice: to release a prisoner during the Passover festival—a generous and gracious gesture.

But the crowd, incited by the chief priests, asked for the release of Barabbas, an insurrectionist and an actual murderer. Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" How fickle was that crowd in Jerusalem, that the shout of 'Hosanna' could so soon turned into cries of 'Crucify'. How misguided were the people, that they got it wrong the both times.

It was up to the Apostles, Peter and John, weeks later, post crucifixion and resurrection, standing bravely before the same religious authority, in the account recorded in Acts 4, trying to make sense of it all. As Peter tells it, this Jesus Christ of Nazareth is, quoting from Psalm 118:22, "*the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.*"

In the Rabbinic tradition, there was an explanation of this verse. It is only a legend, but quite illuminative. The story dates back to the construction of the temple of Solomon, as recorded in 1 Kings 6:7, "*The house was built with stone finished at the quarry so that neither hammer nor ax nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built.*"

According to the legend, all the stones sent up from the quarry were practically of the same size and shape, except for one, found to be different

from all the rest. Upon seeing that odd shape stone, the builders said, "There is no place for this stone. This must be a mistake." So they rolled it to the edge of the cliff and tumbled it down into the Kedron Valley below the temple area.

Years later, as the Solomon's temple was seven years in making, the builders were finally ready for the chief cornerstone; so they sent down the order for it. They were told by the quarry, "You should already have it; we delivered it to you years ago." The search proved fruitless, until it finally dawned on a foreman, "I remember now. There was a stone much different from the rest, and we thought it was a mistake, and had rejected it."

So the builders went down to the Kedron Valley, and searched frantically amongst the debris, until finding the very stone they had rejected. Once they had hoisted it to the top of the cliff, then back to the platform and put it into place. Voila! It fit perfectly! The stone the builders rejected had become the headstone of the corner.

It is an interesting story. Not really how one would build a temple. But no doubt Peter was aware of it when he cited Psalm 118. More likely, Peter was alluding to a wordplay involved in saying that the stone has become the 'cornerstone'.

The word in Hebrew is *pinah*, or corner. It is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe a political leader. We see that in Judges 20:2, 1 Samuel 14:38, and Isaiah 19:13. It is by such a wordplay of the dual meanings of *pinah*, as both a 'cornerstone' and a 'leader', that we come to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

The cornerstone was the major structural part of ancient buildings. It had to be strong enough to support what was built upon it, and it had to be precisely laid, because every other part of the structure was oriented to it. The cornerstone was the support, the orienter, and the unifier of the entire building. That is what Jesus Christ is to God's building, the church. The whole building ties together because of the cornerstone.

But this building process is not complete, with only the cornerstone. We all play a part, as Apostle Paul explains in Ephesians 2:19-21,

*"You are...members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone;
in him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord,*

*in whom you also are built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.”*

When I first began serving as an ordained minister, it was at my so-called home congregation in Montreal, a congregation that I grew up with, and had left it for years. The first thing I noticed, was the presence of Mohammed. Mohammed was a Middle-Eastern man, with a bald head and a beard. In a congregation of mostly Asian immigrants, Mohammed stood out. He worshiped with the congregation on Sunday, in the Taiwanese language which he did not understand, and worked as a janitor for the church. He was a quiet man who didn't say much, but I got to know him gradually. He came from a region between Iran and Iraq, fled the conflict and settled in Montreal. People in the congregation welcomed him, introduced him to Jesus, and soon he was baptized into the Christian faith.

He was very thankful that the church had employed him as a janitor, and he worked diligently without complaint. Later I found out Mohammed was actually quite well versed in medical knowledge. I asked him, "Mohammed, how do you know all these?" He informed me that he was trained as a doctor in his home country, but could not practice here in Canada. Over the years, Mohammed had actually helped out, medically, not just me but a number of members of the congregation.

Last summer, I returned to Montreal and worshipped with the congregation. Mohammed was still there, faithfully mopping the floor. I greeted him with a big hug. I think I will always remember Mohammed, the doctor/janitor, who is but a brick, a living stone of God's church.

So Christ Jesus is the **Chief Cornerstone**, and we are the bricks, the living stones. Upon us joined together with Christ, God is building not just a dwelling place for God, but the Kingdom of God. In this heavenly and earthly kingdom, every tear shall be wiped away, mourning and crying and pain shall be no more, as death shall be no more, for God is making all things new. When will these things take place. Oh, I do not know, but I suspect, sooner than we think.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**