

“Solid Rock or Stumbling Block?”

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

It doesn't take much for a solid rock to become a stumbling block.

Driving through the hills of southeastern Pennsylvania during my student days, I noticed the many stone walls that farmers had constructed during the 18th century to divide their properties. These walls were monuments to the ingenuity and craftsmanship of these landowners; the walls were constructed from stones found on their properties and put together without any mortar or cement. They had stood the test of times and remained largely intact; but here and there, time and the elements had forced some stones to become dislodged and fall off the walls. Farmers would regularly walk alongside their walls to find any fallen stones that might get caught in a plow or cause a farmer or field hand to stumble. When a stone was a part of the wall, it served a useful purpose; when it was not within the wall, it became an obstacle and potential hazard.

In today's Gospel lesson, we see how one who had been identified as a solid rock can very quickly become a stumbling block. When he proclaimed that Jesus is *“the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16), Jesus praises Simon Peter and declares that *“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”* (16:18). Simon Peter becomes the solid rock upon which our Lord will build his church, the assembly of all believers among who the Word of God will be proclaimed and the mission of Jesus will continue throughout all generations to the ends of the earth.

Today's Gospel lesson marks a turning point in Matthew's Gospel, with Jesus turning inward to instruct his disciples regarding the suffering of the Son of Man. *“From that time on”* (16:21) is the same introductory formula that Matthew had previously used to mark the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry (*“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* – 4:17). Here it marks the beginning of the next major phase of the story as Jesus is about to begin his southward journey to Jerusalem, which is a necessary part of his work as Messiah: *“... Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* The suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ are at the heart of the Gospel proclamation, the good news that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6:5), the faith that we confess as we gather together as God's people in worship:

- “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.” – *Small Catechism*.

But this message of good news did not sound all that good to Simon Peter, who immediately *“took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid is, Lord! This must never happen to you.’”* (16:22). We can understand why Peter might have been horrified by this news; after all, how would we react if a friend told us that he or she was about to suffer such a fate? We would do everything possible to prevent such suffering! But Peter’s strong objection may also be due to his understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. Like many people of his time, he may have expected a Messiah who would be sent from God as a mighty warrior-king to defeat the enemies of God’s people and to restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations (a perspective shared by the other apostles who ask Jesus before his ascension *“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”* – Acts 1:6). Jesus’ passion prediction did not line up with Peter’s expectations of the long-awaited Messiah, the Redeemer of God’s people.

- Jesus’ announcement of the death-dealing events about to unfold in Jerusalem point to anything but the glory of security, influence, or power. What about the new church, and its authority to bind and to loose? What about withstanding the power of death (“the gates of Hades”)? How can these things happen if God’s own anointed one is to be tortured and executed? No wonder Peter protests. *‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!’* – Audrey West.

Jesus’ response to Peter is equally swift, if somewhat harsh: *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (6:23). At first, it seems that Jesus has completely changed his mind about Simon Peter; the one whose confession he praised, the one he designated as the Rock upon which he will build his church, the one who is given authority to bind and to loose – now Jesus is equating him with the Devil, the Evil One, the one who seeks to separate us from God and the light and life that are ours through Jesus Christ. Is Simon Peter the solid rock, or a stumbling block? Is he the one upon whom the Church will be built, or is the enemy of God’s people who actively seeks their destruction?

In order to better understand what is happening here, we need to go back to Jesus’ encounter with Satan during his ordeal in the wilderness. During that encounter, Satan seeks to tempt Jesus to use his power and authority for his own selfish gain rather than for the purposes that God intended they be used; *“Satan dared Jesus to use his authority as Son of God for his own purposes instead of serving God’s mission in the world. He tempted Jesus to set his mind on human things rather than on the things of God”* (West). But Jesus resists each of the Devil’s three temptation, using the power of the Word of God to defeat the power of the Evil One. Jesus’ final words to the Devil are *“get behind me, Satan!”* (4:10); he refused to fall into the Tempter’s trap and be diverted from God’s mission. Jesus knows that the temptation to accomplish his ministry in a way that might be judged successful according to human criteria is, in fact, a demonic temptation – not matter who utters these words or what their other motivations may be. Jesus’ mission is to inaugurate the “kingdom of heaven,” an alternative to the world’s kingdoms, a radically different way of exercising rulership and authority. No matter who offers him an alternative path or how appealing this alternative may be, it is necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, where he will not only suffer and die but *“on the third day he will be raised.”* (16:21). *“God will put the lie to violence as the ultimate power.”* (West).

- “Here his opponent is none other than the ‘rock’ on which he will build the new community. Peter the rock becomes Peter the stone of “stumbling” (*skandalon*). Despite his revelation from God, Peter continues to think as good human beings are accustomed to think: reasonably, egocentrically, and in terms of human friendship and ‘success.’” – M. Eugene Boring.

While Peter is strongly rebuked for taking exception to Jesus' passion prediction, there is another aspect to Jesus' command to *"get behind me."* These are the same words that are spoken in Jesus' invitation to discipleship: *"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* (4:19). A disciple is one who follows Jesus, who *"gets behind"* our Lord to learn from his teachings and the way he lives among God's people. While Jesus rebukes Peter for his Satanic-like words and behavior, Jesus invites his disciple to recommit himself to being a follower of Jesus, which means rejecting all other paths and allegiances so that one is behind the true teacher, the true Lord who *"leads me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake"* (Psalm 23:3).

- *"Peter is the recipient of blessing, but now, he is putting his own thoughts ahead of the ways of God, which makes him a stumbling block – a hindrance to Jesus' mission. Nevertheless (and this is significant), Jesus does not break relationship with him. Instead, he reminds Peter of the proper place for a follower."* – West.

Jesus chooses to use this moment as an opportunity to teach all his disciples what it means for them to be followers, to *"get behind me."* For those who have already responded to the call of Christ, Jesus' announcement of the Son of Man's own way to the cross is also the way the disciple must follow: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* (16:24). Answering the call to discipleship comes with a cost: for some it meant leaving their nets on the seashore to follow Jesus, while others left home and careers behind. Many of those who first heard these words would literally follow Jesus in the way that led to martyrdom for their faithful witness to the Gospel. But all who answer this call and the sacrifices it entails also know of the rewards that are far greater than anything that one might possess in this life; for *"what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"* (16:26). Those who choose to *"get behind"* Jesus know that *"by his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you"* (1 Peter 1:3-4).

- *"Our hope is not set on possessions or an inheritance here on earth but on an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and does not fade away ... On earth there is no pleasure so great that it does not fade in time. People grow tired of everything, but this good is different. This is all ours through the mercy of God in Christ, if we believe it, and it is given to us freely."* – Martin Luther, 1523,

While the cost of following Jesus in the path of discipleship that leads to the cross will be costly, it is a path that ultimately leads in the hope of resurrection and eternal life when Jesus' followers *"see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom"* (16:28), the reign of God in which *"[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4).

Peter's descent from solid rock to stumbling block was caused by many factors; but one critical difference was that while he was connected to the Church that Christ has built *"into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5) he was fulfilling Christ's mission for the Church to be *"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"* (2:9). But when Peter separated himself from this *"house of living stones"* so that he might talk Jesus out of his intended journey to Jerusalem, he becomes a *"stumbling block"* that is both separated from the Church and its mission and as a result becomes hindrance to the fulfillment of God's purposes. He ceases

to be the “rock” upon which the church is built when he no longer lives as once who truly follows Jesus, a disciple who hears the Word of God and seeks to live in obedience to Christ’s teachings.

- “The call to discipleship is a matter of community. This is not an individualistic ethic of the solitary ‘I,’ but it the ethic of the community of disciples that confesses Jesus to be the Christ and lives toward the full coming of the kingdom of God for which it prays, accompanied by the presence of Christ during its time of mission.” – Eugene Boring.

When we are baptized, we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ, the house of living stones built upon the solid foundation of the Church’s proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the Word of God that the Church is called to proclaim to all people. We are called to follow our Lord, to “get behind” Jesus and his mission, to be the light that shines in the darkness so that all may know God’s steadfast love. But it is easy for us to become “stumbling blocks” when we separate ourselves from the Church and its mission, when we follow paths that may hold promise but which in reality draw us away from God, when we seek to have *our* will be done rather than pray that *“thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

- “Hence you see that in this prayer God commands us to pray against ourselves, and so teaches us that we have no greater enemy than ourselves. For our will is greater power within us, and we must pray against it ... No matter what happens, let my life be governed not by my will, but yours. As no one’s own will prevails in heaven, so may it also be here on earth.” – Luther.

Our call as the Church is to remain the people who have been gathered together by Christ to be the embodiment of his love in our world, to share the Word that became flesh with a world hungry for the good news it contains, to be a people who seek to follow in Christ’s footsteps and fulfill his loving purposes so that all may know that they are beloved children of God.

- “A community without its appropriate text clearly has no power or energy or courage for mission; it will be endlessly quarrelsome because it depends on ideology and has no agreed-upon area where it adjudicates its conflicts ... the biblical text creates the church, that is, the text summons a certain kind of audience to host and receive the text ... it is reality – summoning more radical than we expect, but a summons to a reality that is in the end our God-given true self and true community.” – Walter Brueggemann.

A farmer who discover a stone that has become dislodged from a wall does not leave that stone on the ground but picks it up and returns it to the wall so that it can continue its true purpose. When Peter becomes a stumbling block to our Lord by putting himself in the place Satan in order to tempt Jesus to choose a path other than the one that leads to the cross and resurrection, Jesus rightfully rebukes him but does not leave him behind or reject him. Peter will fail again, most notably when he denies knowing our Lord following Jesus’ arrest; but even that is not the end of his call to discipleship, for Jesus commands him to be the one who will *“feed my sheep”* (John 21:17) and it is Peter whose proclamation on the day of Pentecost begins the mission of the Church to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). Even a stumbling block can once again become the solid rock upon which Christ’s Church will continue its mission and purpose to be *“an alternative community with an alternative identity, vision, and vocation, preoccupied with praise and obedience toward the God we Christians know fully in Jesus of Nazareth.”* (Brueggemann).

There will be times when we may become stumbling blocks, when we might seek to separate ourselves from the body into which Christ has built us in order to pursue our own desires or fulfill our own needs; but when we return to the Lord, we will be rebuilt into the house of living stones so that we might know the joy of being one with each other in Jesus Christ and share that joy with others. May we pray that our Lord may keep us united in *“God’s house of living stones, built for his own habitation”* where the good news of our Lord and Saviour continues to be shared: *“I know my own, my own know me; you, not the world, my face shall see; my peace I leave with you.”* (ELW Hymn 652).

Amen.