

5th Sunday of Easter, yr. a, 5/10/2020
Acts 7:54-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
Living Stones – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

Have you ever experienced an earthquake? It's an unsettling, disorienting even frightening thing to feel the ground under your feet start to move and shake and feeling as if you're hardly standing on firm ground. There is a sense that the ground on which we stand is shaking and shifting under our feet.

The world is spinning and moving and it's easy to get disoriented. I remember my chiropractor once told me that when I experience this disorienting vertigo if I lock my eyes in a straight line to a fixed point it will help stop the spinning. And it does.

There's no avoiding the reality in our lives that the ground is shaking and shifting under our feet and things are spinning and disorienting. In the midst of a global pandemic nothing is normal, nothing feels solid or reliable anymore. All the fault lines in the foundations of our society and culture are exposed – the suffering and despair of income inequalities, healthcare insurance rationing, essential workers paid wages that cannot sustain them and jobs that expose them to great risk, an economy that has devolved into benefiting the prosperity of a few at the cost of the common good of all.

What we thought was solid ground no longer feels so solid. What is God calling us to be and do? What is the fixed point with which we can align our vision, our souls and bodies?

One of the earliest and strongest memories I have as a very young child is of those rare times when my parents would go out for the evening. I would ask, "Where are you going? When are you coming home? Why do you have to go?" These were my constant questions. They would always reassure me with many words, but after they left I worried. I would do everything in my power (and my willpower was considerable) not to go to sleep. I'd lie in bed waiting. Until finally, I'd hear the front door open, familiar voices talking softly in the hallway, footsteps coming up the stairs. I'd close my eyes as if asleep. Then a kiss on my forehead, and a whispered voice, "We're home. Everything's alright. Go to sleep."

"Do not let your hearts be troubled, be in anguish; Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's home are many dwelling places ... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." Thomas, one of the disciples, says to Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" (John 14: 1-5)

Like a child seeking reassurance from parents, like those first disciples needing reassurance from Jesus, we find ourselves looking for solid ground,

seeking after meaning, purpose, some kind of wholeness and sense of belonging in communion with God, with one another, with this world in which we live. So much pulls at us, tears at us, threatens us with being left to ourselves, our own devices and desires, all of which crash up against others, and against all that we don't know or understand. It seems now in the time of pandemic as if in our need for certainty, for a firm foundation, a rock on which we can stand, our vision of what is good and perfect, our vision of what we are meant to be as human beings made in God's image, feels more and more besieged and threatened. And in worry and anxiety we keep our eyes wide open at night waiting for the voices of reassurance and loving touch to come home.

In our worry and anxiety, our anger and frustration, and feeling as if only I, only we, are left and we have to hold on for dear life; how often do we find ourselves tempted to pick up the stones of the foundation on which we think we stand and throw them at others? Stoning those who disagree, those who we think are to blame, those who don't believe the way we believe, who live in a way strange to us, those who simply don't measure up to the world's standards of success and fulfillment – stoning them all with our own convictions, our partial understanding, our own fears, and need for reassurance. And how often do we ourselves feel like we're being pelted by others throwing their own stones of righteousness and indignation at us?

After Stephen had given his testimony before the Council of the Sanhedrin – the council of the religious leaders and teachers of the people – they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen looked up into heaven and saw a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God and he told everyone what he saw. They covered their ears, dragged him off, and began to stone him. (Acts 7:54f.)

We can get sucked into throwing stones at one another – at our “enemies” without even thinking sometimes. Sucked into living in an “Us vs. Them” world ... or a “Them vs. Them” world, trying to keep our own heads down for all the mud and rocks flying ... socially, politically, culturally, economically, educationally ... No wonder we are feeling our teeth grinding and rage welling up within us.

The question we face is ... is our faith strong enough to stand on without grinding our teeth and raging? Can we possibly live in such a way as to not throw stones? Can we embrace a way to live that is more than simply shaking our heads at suffering, evil and hurt around us, and believing we can do little to change it? In following Jesus, can we see the Way, the Truth, the Life that refuses to hold the garments of those so quick to throw stones? What is the foundation on which we stand, the fixed point on which we can lock our vision as we seek to live faithfully as God’s people?

Peter writes, in his First Letter to the exiles of dispersion and persecution after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, writes as the very foundations of those who believe seemed to be crumbling all around them: Rid yourselves of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ... come to (Christ Jesus), a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, ... 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (1 Peter 2:4-5,9-10)

For Peter, for Stephen, for the others disciples – perhaps for us – its not all that important that the Temples we have built to contain our ideas of what is right, and just, and God-given remain firm. Maybe they have to be shaken up, maybe we need to feel the ground on which we think we stand shaking and shifting. Because we need to be reminded that what God calls us to, is to follow in God's Way, trusting in God's truth and God's love, living life on behalf of others desiring only the good of others. In our gospel reading from John Jesus tells his disciples: Truly I tell you, the one who trusts me will also do the works that I do, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I go to the Father ...”

Jesus doesn't stay as those first disciples knew him. In the same way we have to let him go, let go of all that we thought we knew, all that we thought was

such a firm foundation, so that we might become signs of God's Risen Presence in this world.

"Truly, truly I tell you, the one who trusts me will also do the works that I do, in fact, will do greater works ..."

This is what Jesus is calling us to ... to continue on the Way, speaking the Truth, living the Life of Christ. What is this Way, this Truth, this Life? I'd like to end by sharing the words of Jean Vanier – a man who lives and works in community with severely disabled people - in a commentary he wrote on this passage in John's gospel:

What is (our) mission? It is to give life, eternal life, and to reveal the face and heart of God to people. It is to be a presence of God in the world where there is an absence of God. God's works are not big miracles, which some heroic disciples may be called to do, but all those works of simple kindness and goodness which give people life and lead them to trust in themselves and in God." Amen.

