

John 14:1–14; Acts 7:55–60; Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16; 1 Peter 2:2–10

OPENER

There are some things we do not think about until the storm comes.

Most of us do not walk around the house every day thinking about the foundation. We think about the paint, the furniture, the windows, the light, the temperature, maybe the roof if it starts leaking. But the foundation? Most days, we ignore it.

Until the storm comes.

When the wind starts pushing against the walls, when the rain comes sideways, when the ground shakes, when the sirens go off, suddenly we care very much about what the house is built on.

And in Indiana, we know something about that. When the sky turns green and the tornado sirens begin to sound, people do not stand in the living room admiring the decorations. They go to the safest place. They go low. They go to the strongest room. They look for shelter.

Because in a storm, what matters is not what looks impressive. What matters is what can hold.

INTRODUCTION

That is where our Scriptures bring us this morning.

- David is in trouble, and he cries out for refuge.
- Jesus is preparing his disciples for trouble, and he tells them not to let their hearts be troubled.
- Stephen is surrounded by trouble, and he entrusts himself to the risen Jesus.
- Peter writes to believers who know trouble, and he tells them they are being built into a spiritual house.

At first glance, these passages may seem to be going in different directions. A psalm. A farewell teaching from Jesus. A martyr's death. A letter about the church. But when we let Scripture interpret Scripture, one golden thread appears.

The God who is our refuge has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ, and through the risen Christ, God is forming a holy people who bear his presence in the world.

That is the movement of this message: From refuge. To revelation. To witness. To living stones.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Psalm 31 begins with a prayer from distress. David says, *"In you, Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness"* (Ps. 31:1, NIV).

That is not a casual prayer, it's the prayer of someone who knows he cannot save himself. David is not pretending life is easy. He is not acting as though faith means no danger, no enemies, no fear, no pressure. He is crying out because the storm is real.

But then comes the line that echoes through the whole Bible: "*Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God*" (Ps. 31:5, NIV).

This becomes more than David's prayer. Jesus prays this from the cross. Stephen takes that prayer into his death. And the church, His people learn to pray it in suffering, in uncertainty, in fear, in surrender.

This is why context matters. Psalm 31 is not just a personal devotion for a hard day. It becomes part of the redemptive grammar of Scripture. The Old Testament gives us the language of **trust**. Jesus fulfills that **trust** in *obedient surrender*. Then Stephen shows us what it looks like when that same **trust** lives in the church.

So the first movement of scripture today is refuge... God is our refuge. But refuge does not mean escape from every storm. Refuge means our life is held by God in the storm.

That leads us into John 14: Jesus is sitting with troubled disciples. He has spoken of betrayal. He has spoken of denial. He has spoken of leaving them. The emotional temperature in the room is high. Anxiety is rising. The disciples do not understand what is coming, but they can feel that something is changing.

And into that room of stress and anxiety, Jesus says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled*" (John 14:1, NIV). Now, that is an important sentence. Jesus does not say there is nothing troubling. He does not say, "Don't worry, nothing hard is coming." He does not deny reality. The cross is coming. Confusion is coming. Grief is coming. Persecution is coming.

But he says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled*" (John 14:1, NIV). That means the trouble around them does not have to become the ruler within them.

Guess what? That is holiness language. Holiness is not pretending life is peaceful when it is not. It is being so centered in God that the storm does not get to become our master.

Now in that room, someone we all can relate to asks the honest question: "*Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*" Jesus looks at Thomas and answers, "*I am the way and the truth and the life*" (John 14:6, NIV).

That sentence is the center of His message and this sermon:

- Jesus does not merely point to the way.
- Jesus is the Way. Amen?
- Jesus does not merely teach truth. He is the Truth. Amen?
- Jesus does not merely offer life. He is the Life. Amen?

This... This is the Gospel of God. God has not left humanity guessing in the dark. God has not simply handed us principles, rituals, ideas, or religious techniques. God has come near in Jesus

Christ. The Father is made known in the Son. The way to God has become personal. The Gospel of God IS the Good News of Jesus...

And this matters because John 14 is sometimes **reduced** to a passage about going to heaven when we die. It is about hope beyond death, yes. But it is not only that. Jesus is not giving his disciples permission to ignore the world because they have rooms waiting somewhere else. He is telling them “Via, Veritas et Vita.” Because he is **The Way, The Truth and The Life**, they can live now without being mastered by fear.

The good news is not simply that believers get somewhere after death. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has come near (here), made himself known (here), opened the way home (here), and is forming a holy people (here) **who live from the Father’s presence now**.

That is the second movement of scripture today: revelation. God is not only our refuge. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Then **Acts 7** shows what that revelation looks like under pressure: Stephen is surrounded by hostility. He has spoken the truth, and the people are enraged. The system around him is anxious, reactive, and violent. They drag him out. They pick up stones.

And here is the image I want us to hold onto this morning: **A stone can be used to wound, or a stone can be used to build.**

The same kind of object can become an instrument of death or part of a holy house:

- In Acts 7, stones are used to kill.
- In 1 Peter 2, stones are used to build.

That is not accidental. Sin takes what God created and turns it toward destruction. Grace takes what is broken and builds it into witness.

Stephen is being stoned, but he is not being destroyed by the spirit of the crowd. Do you see that? **He sees what they cannot see.** Scripture says, “**Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God**” (Acts 7:55).

That is holy presence under pressure.

Stephen is not delivered from suffering, but he is not abandoned in suffering. He prays, “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*” (Acts 7:59).

Do you hear Psalm 31?

Do you hear Jesus from the cross?

Do you hear the golden thread?

David said, “*Into your hands I commit my spirit*” (Ps. 31:5, NIV).

Jesus prayed that from the cross.

Stephen prays it to Jesus as he dies.

That means Stephen's death is not just an example of courage. It is the life of Jesus being reproduced in a Spirit-filled witness. And then Stephen does something even more remarkable. **He forgives!** He says, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Acts 7:60). **Forgive them.**

Holiness is not withdrawal from conflict. Holiness is faithful presence within conflict without becoming captive to its spirit.

In stressful anxious situations, people often react, blame, or triangulate (bring you into their trouble). They attack or collapse into the emotional field around them. But Stephen is connected, but he is not controlled. He speaks truth to his people. He prays for his persecutors. He entrusts himself to Jesus. But he does not let their anxiety become his lord.

How? He is governed by the risen Christ. And church, that is a word for us.

In anxious times, we are tempted to become reactive. We can become people of outrage, fear, nostalgia, suspicion, or self-protection. We can start picking up stones, even if we do not hold them in our hands. Sometimes our stones are words. Sometimes they are assumptions. Sometimes they are contempt. Sometimes they are silence used as punishment. Sometimes they are spiritual superiority.

But get this... **The Spirit of Jesus forms another kind of people.**

- Not people who pick up stones to wound.
- People who become living stones to build.

That brings us to 1 Peter 2.

Peter writes, "*As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him*" (1 Pet. 2:4, NIV).

Jesus is the living Stone. Rejected by people. Chosen by God. Precious to the Father.

Then Peter says, "*You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house*" (1 Pet. 2:5, NIV).

That is the church. Not a crowd gathered by preference. Not a club gathered by similarity. Not a brand gathered by taste. Not a people gathered around anxiety.

The church is a people built on Jesus Christ, Amen.

Peter takes the Old Testament language of temple, priesthood, election, and holiness and gathers all of it around Jesus. ALL OF THIS IS JESUS... Then he says, "*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession*" (1 Pet. 2:9).

That is not triumphalism. That is vocation.

Triumphalism says, "We are chosen, so we are better."

Vocation says, "We are chosen, so we are called."

Triumphalism uses faith as a badge.

Vocation receives faith as a mission.

Triumphalism admires itself.

Vocation declares the mercy of God.

Peter tells us why we are chosen: “*That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV).

And that my Friends, is the purpose of holiness.

TAKE AWAY

Holiness is not the church congratulating itself for being different. Holiness is the life of God becoming visible in a people who have been called out of darkness and into light.

This is where the Friends’ faith belongs so naturally. Early Friends were not trying to create another religious label. At their best, they were seeking **primitive Christianity revived**, the living reality of apostolic faith, not a tradition to be past down through the years... A holy people is not formed by religious branding. **A holy people is formed by coming to Christ the living Stone and being built together into a people who bear his Light.**

That means:

- The church is not just a place where people come to hear about God’s presence.
- The church is meant to become a people of God’s presence.

Paul N. Anderson (one of our professors at George Fox) calls this a “Theology of Presence.” Thomas Kelly (my spiritual hero), stop what you are doing and come back to the “Divine Center.” D. Elton Trueblood (who was here dedicating this church) would remind us that Friends at their best, are “recovering basic Christianity in lived form.” N. T. Wright (my go to theologian) would remind us that “resurrection hope” is not escape from the world but the “beginning of new creation life in the world.” And in the language of the Flow of Holiness, “holiness is relational fidelity: God’s steadfast presence with us in Christ, and our Spirit-formed responsiveness to God and one another over time.”^[1]

That is what these passages are showing us. Together:

- Psalm 31 shows faithful entrustment.
- John 14 shows the Son opening communion with the Father.
- Acts 7 shows holy presence under pressure.
- 1 Peter 2 shows the community formed into a holy priesthood.

The river of “living water” runs all the way through:

- From refuge.
- To revelation.
- To witness.” To living stones.

CONCLUDING

So here is the question for us:

What are we doing with the stones?

Because the world knows how to throw stones.

Anxiety knows how to throw stones.

Fear knows how to throw stones.

Religion without holiness knows how to throw stones.

A church that has forgotten mercy knows how to throw stones.

But Jesus takes rejected stones and builds a holy house.

He takes Peter, who denied him, and makes him a shepherd.

He takes Stephen, who is killed by stones, and makes his witness seed for the church.

He takes people who once were not a people and makes them the people of God.

He takes us, with all our rough edges, and builds us together by mercy.

That is why this sermon is not only about the Gospel of Later, it is about the Gospel of Now: what kind of people we become while we live.

Jesus says, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled”* (John 14:1, NIV).

David says, *“Into your hands I commit my spirit”* (Ps. 31:5, NIV).

Stephen says, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:59, NIV).

Peter says, *“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”* (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV).

These are not separate devotional thoughts.

They are one formation path.

Trust God as refuge.

Come to Jesus as the Way.

Bear witness without surrendering to anxiety.

Let the Spirit build you into a holy people.

And maybe that is the word we need in this season.

Do not become the stone in someone else’s hand.

Do not let fear use you as a weapon.

Do not let anxiety shape your witness.

Do not let outrage form your discipleship.

Come to Christ, the living Stone.

Let him hold you.

Let him center you.

Let him build you.

Let him make you part of a people who declare mercy and light.

Because the Gospel of God is this: the holy God does not abandon his creation to darkness, anxiety, violence, or shame. He comes to us in the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus opens the way to the Father. Jesus brings us into mercy. And then Jesus forms us into living stones, a holy people, built together for His presence in the world.

So, when the storm comes, remember the foundation.

When anxiety rises, remember....

When the way seems unclear, remember...

When the world picks up stones, remember...

And when you wonder what the church is meant to be, remember WE are the living stones, built together, declaring the praises of the One who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

That is Scripture interpreting Scripture.

That is holiness as the Gospel of God made visible.

And that is the holy presence of Christ, from refuge to living stones.

Amen.

Notes

[1] Paul David Bravard, "Flow of Holiness" ministry and dissertation framework; Paul N. Anderson, "A Theology of Presence," *Evangelical Friend* 26, no. 6 (July/August 1993); Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*; D. Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers*; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).