

## **“Living Stone”**

Sermon, Trinity 10, 2019, Gospel, Luke 19:41-48, Immanuel

Picture this. It is the morning of Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding a donkey from Bethany toward Jerusalem, two miles away. Crowds are already lining the path that leads over the Mount of Olives and down the Kidron valley before rising to the city of Jerusalem and the east gate of the Temple. Hundreds, if not thousands of pilgrims have come to the city for the celebration of the Passover, many from distant towns in Judea and some as far away as Egypt and Greece. Many have heard about this man Jesus, His miracles and His authoritative teaching. Many hope that He is the promised Messiah, the Davidic King come to restore Israel to its former glory. They shout to Jesus psalms of praise. They place palm branches and cloaks on the road for Jesus to ride upon. Jesus ascends the dirt path that winds up the hill. And as He reaches the top a magnificent panoramic scene unfolds before him. There, across the valley stands Jerusalem, the Holy City, and with it the Temple, the center of the worship of His people, the beautiful edifice built on the spot where Solomon’s destroyed Temple had stood, the work begun by Herod the Great before Jesus was born, and still not completely finished when He died. This was the place His mother Mary and stepfather Joseph took Him to be presented and redeemed as firstborn when He was a month old. This is the place which He called, “His Father’s house”, when He had stayed behind on a visit with His parents to Jerusalem when He was a boy. This was the seat of Kings, the City of David, his ancestor, Mount Zion, the holy hill of the Lord.

But when He saw it He did not rejoice. He wept. He wept over it, our text says. He said, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!” As if to say, “If only you had listened to my words! Accepted my free offer of the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, of salvation! If only you had trusted in me, not your religious leaders, your false shepherds, your wolves in sheep’s clothing! If only you had believed in me, the Son of God.” But Jesus says it is too late. For now, He says, “they are hidden from your eyes.” They will continue to reject Him. As a result they will be destroyed. He says, “For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” And in 70 AD it all came to pass, exactly as Jesus prophesied. The Romans, tired of one rebellion after another in Judea, set siege to the city, and when starvation had weakened the defenders, took the city, burning it, slaughtering the inhabitants, burning the Temple and, after a prolonged effort tearing it down, stone by stone until not a stone upon another was left. The stones are still there, massive testimonies to the fallen glory of the Temple. Some of the stones that made up the Temple of the Living God lie there still, now lifeless memorials to the former glory, dead now. Dead Stones.

For Jesus had come to this beloved and doomed city with the Word of Life, but He and His Word had been rejected. He was the stone of stumbling which God was laying in Zion, the rock of offense, which the builders rejected, which would become the cornerstone of the new city of God, the New Jerusalem, His Church, gathered from

many nations. He would be the Church's one foundation and the confession of faith in Him would be the rock on which the church would be built. But first the Temple of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, would be besieged. As Jerusalem was to be surrounded by her enemies 40 years later by the legions of Titus, the Roman General, so Jesus would be surrounded in the next four days by a legion of hostile priests, scribes, and Pharisees, intent on breaching the walls of His teaching, they would set up a barricade around Him in His trial before the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate, keeping out any witnesses to His innocence, barricading the truth of His claims from reaching their hearts of stone. They used Jesus' statement, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." and used it against Him, accusing Him of advocating the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. They tore the Temple of the Living God, Jesus Christ, down to the ground with their whips, their nails, their spear, and their cross on the stony hill of Calvary. They took the rubble of the demolished Temple, His dead body, and placed it in a tomb carved out of dead stone, and rolled a rock against the opening, to lie there amid the other dead stones, like the dead stones of the Jerusalem Temple that can be seen in modern day Jerusalem.

So what does this have to do with you today? This: You, who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death. His body, the Church, of which He is the living foundation and you the living stones, is constantly under siege. In recent years, many Christian churches have been attacked and demolished in China, in Egypt, in Syria, and in Iraq. In April of 2014, a huge Chinese church was demolished by government authorities days just days before it was to open its doors. In Iraq, the Tomb of Jonah the Prophet in Nineveh was attacked by Islamic soldiers, and the tomb defaced. The Christian populations, men, women, and children in these countries face imprisonment, organ harvesting, torture, rape, kidnapping, and death by the most barbarous methods. The devil continues to rage at the Christian Church, the City on the Hill, the New Jerusalem, besieging it, hemming it in, tearing down the dead stones of its church buildings and tearing down the living stones to the ground.

And within the former nations of Europe and America where Christianity was spread and planted by missionaries and pastors, you see churches empty or emptying, congregations where parents no longer bring their children with them to worship or for catechesis, where the faith is not nurtured and taught in the homes.

But take heart, for you were not just baptized into Christ's death, but into His resurrection, too. Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of His Father, so you too will be raised. Just as the Temple, the place where God dwells bodily--Jesus Christ--was besieged and torn down for your sins, and was raised three days later, so you, and your brothers and sisters in Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, who are suffering the most unimaginable cruelties and death will be raised to life eternal with us and all who have gone before you in the faith. For they and you have been given the faith that recognizes the things that truly make for peace--faith in the Word of God and the blessings of the Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Supper. You do see and proclaim Jesus Christ as your Lord and God when He visits you, as He is visiting you this very morning in this blessed sanctuary as surely as when He visited Jerusalem that morning almost two thousand years ago, when He walked into the Temple and quoted Isaiah, "My house shall be a house of prayer." He is visiting you and casting down the tables of

the moneychangers in the hearts of all who would cheat God of what is truly due Him: thanks, praise, trust, and gratitude. He visits you today in forgiveness, comfort and hope, and healing, building you up to face the temptation to despair. He is purifying and strengthening the hearts of you, His brothers and sisters for the battle that lies ahead, the battle that ends in victory.

For Jesus promised the apostle Peter, the Rock, and all the disciples, this is, all believers, that His Church, built on the rock, the ministry of the Gospel of the Messiah, shall prevail against the gates of hell. Church buildings may be destroyed, congregations may diminish, but the Church, the body of Christ, made up of you living stones, will live forever. It **will** stand, through God's Word and unbreakable promise, through the power of His Holy Spirit, working in and through you and your prayers.

So, pray for the Church Militant on earth, the living stones suffering persecution and dissension, outward and inward, and give thanks for the saints of the Church Triumphant, who are your examples for strength amidst adversity. Pray for the living stones of the church around the world and pray for yourselves, and for the pastor that the Holy Spirit will call through you, that you may be kept strong in the faith until the end.

And rejoice always! For in the midst of suffering there is for you the peace that surpasses all understanding. In the midst of destruction there is the healing of the sin-sick soul. In the midst of death there is life eternal, beginning now and fully realized when the true Lord comes again in Glory. Mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice in the Lord, for Your and my Lord said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:10-11).

It is hard to see life in death. It is hard to go on living in hope after losing a loved one. It is hard to see unity amidst division. It is hard to pray for your enemies and love them. It is in fact impossible to do any of this without seeing Jesus Christ as your Savior, your Cornerstone. But you, who have been adopted by your Heavenly Father through Holy Baptism, through the hearing and receiving of the Word in faith, and in the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, have been given sight to see what others cannot. You can look around you and see that you are all Christ's brothers and sisters. You can see Him and know when He visits you, today and in your hour of need. You can see your Christian brothers and sisters being torn down and dying around the world and know that they, with you, are the ever-living stones of the walls of the most beautiful, most glorious, city that ever was, the eternal City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, Zion, the City on the Hill. This city shall stand forever. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. You are its citizens forever. May God's Holy Spirit richly bless you and guide your deliberations today and always. Amen.