

## **“Rejected Rock Saving Stone”**

Luke 22:39-53

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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When I told a friend we would be using pictures and videos from the Holy Land Pilgrimage in this Fall sermon series she replied, “So we’re going to spend ten weeks watching slides from your vacation?” Hopefully it hasn’t been that dull and boring. You may have gathered by now most of what you see on this trip is stones – some are part of sacred sanctuaries and some are ancient ruins. With so many rocks it can be hard to tell your pictures apart. On the trip individuals pulled me aside, showed me their snapshots and asked, “Is this Capernaum, Nazareth or Masada?” “It’s Caesarea,” I’d say. To which the person replied, “Oh. After a while they all look like just another pile of rocks.”

Rocks and stones are sacred – especially in the Holy City of Jerusalem. There are the enormous blocks which form the Western or “Wailing” Wall which is sacred to Jews. Above this stands the golden Dome of the Rock which covers the rock from which, Muslims believe, Muhammad ascended to heaven. Jews call it “The Foundation Stone.” One legend says on the third day of creation God threw this stone into the waters and all the lands extended outward from it making it the source and center of the earth. Some claim this is the rock on which Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac (Genesis 22). Many scholars believe this is the foundation stone of the first Holy Temple in the days of Solomon and the second Holy Temple in the days of Jesus. In fact, this rock is likely the place of the Holy of Holies inside the Temple which means this Foundation Stone is where the Ark of the Covenant once rested, the place where God touches the earth.

The Temple in Jerusalem is God’s House. Its massive polished stones had one purpose: to offer a sacred meeting place between the Lord and His people. It is the foundation of their relationship with God. Yet all of us, tend to build our lives on other foundations instead of God. In Jesus’ day, the tax collectors serve the Romans. The priests and Sadducees focus on the rituals of the Temple. The Pharisees emphasize the rules in the Law. The Zealots pour all their energy into revolution. They put their faith in the Romans, rituals, rules or revolution. Those become their foundation.

From the very beginning, Jesus gives us this warning: don’t build on the wrong foundation. As a construction worker, He knows a sound home begins with a solid foundation. This is why He ends the Sermon on the Mount with this story:

Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. Matthew 7:24-27

Jesus and His Word are the Rock solid foundation for life. This whole Follow series is about how to hear and put into practice Jesus' Word. Why is it essential build on the Rock of Jesus? Because storms happen.

Have you ever faced a storm? I'm not talking about a meteorological disturbance, but a physical, emotional, spiritual disturbance. At first it's clear sailing. Then the wind changes. Suddenly the barometer of your life falls, a wind chill blows across your soul. Sometimes you hear the forecast and see the clouds coming. Sometimes they catch you off guard: a letter from the IRS. A phone call from the lawyer about the court date. The seven projects due in the next three days. The bills pile up on the desk. The desk at work you just cleaned out. The kids want to live with their other parent. The tests come back from the lab. The bottles or pills hidden in the basement. The text from a teen that's left home. The flower placed on the coffin before you walk away.

I'm headin' into a storm. What do I do now God?

Jesus knows about storms. In fact, a super storm is coming. He's been predicting it from the region of Caesarea Philippi to the rejoicing of Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. Now as darkness falls on Passover night, Jesus can tell the tempest is brewing, the storm will strike. Even the twelve feel a strange sadness, a chill in the air and in their souls.

Together, the small company leaves the house inside the city where they shared the Passover supper, their last supper. They make their way down the dark streets and out of a city gate. Up the Kidron Valley they walk past ancient and eerie tombs. They arrive at their usual meeting place on the Mount of Olives.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." Mark 14:32

Jesus taught them many things here during the week. But He has no lesson for them this evening. A storm of suffering is about to descend and they need to get ready.

He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

He leaves the three disciples among the ancient trees.

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Mark 14:33-36

Jesus can see that all the elements are in motion. Soon, one of His own intimate followers who sat at His feet, walked by His side, a disciple whose feet he just washed will use those feet to lead a band of guards to arrest Him. Judas will not betray Him with an accusing finger or a stinging slap on the face. With open arms and a loving kiss he will seal his Master's fate. In less than an hour, Jesus' right hand man will shout at a group of serving girls and boys he never met the Man. Peter will deny his Master three times and

Jesus will have to hear it. The small circle of students, His closest followers, will desert Him in His hour of need. Yes, the storm is coming and He will weather it alone.

How do you face a storm of suffering? The disciples display the whole range of human reaction as they cope with this crisis.

Some avoid suffering by trying to shut it out. Luke says the disciples were so filled with grief they fell asleep. Have you ever gone to bed angry? Have you ever felt so blue you just didn't want to get up in the morning? Avoiding the pain puts it off, but doesn't make it go away.

Sometimes pain makes us attack or lash out as when Peter swung his sword and cut off a slave's ear. Suffering can cause us to attack those around us even when they are not responsible for our pain. All this does is drive away the people we need for support.

A common way to deal with suffering is denial as when Peter denied the Lord. "I don't have a problem. I don't have an addiction. I can handle this. I don't need to change. I don't need your help." Denial blinds you to the danger until it's too late.

And last, there is the urge to run away as the disciples did when Jesus was arrested. Sometimes the hurt is so intense you just want to escape from your job, your home, your life. Avoid, attack, deny, desert. That's the way we deal with suffering. But Jesus does none of these. He stands firmly on the Rock of God.

Under the cloak of secrecy and darkness, the armed mob drags Jesus back into the city. Over the next hours, He stands alone in a series of trials. First, Jesus is judged by the High Priest and the ruling council in the Chamber of Hewn Stones by the Temple. They condemn Him to death on the charge of blasphemy against God. Since the Romans deny them the power to execute, He is led across town to the glorious Palace built forty years earlier by Herod the Great. Here, Herod welcomed the Wise men who searched for the one born King of the Jews. Now the Roman governor Pontus Pilate stays here. He normally resides in Caesarea on the coast but, during Passover, his practice is to oversee crowd control. Now a firestorm falls into his lap. Pilate is ruthless and cruel by nature but he also wants to avoid entanglement in a religious controversy.

Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. John 18:31

When Pilate learns Jesus is from Galilee, he sends Him to be judged by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and son of Herod the Great who also is in Jerusalem for the Passover.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies. Luke 23:8-12

Jesus is led back to Pilate. On the pavement of Herod the Great's palace, Pilate sits in judgment over the Judge of all humanity. Instead of releasing an innocent man he bends to the demand of the masses.

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. Luke 23:24-25

Scourged and beaten, whipped and stripped, they lead the Lamb of God through the nearest gate to an ugly rock which rises in an abandoned quarry outside the city walls. Over the years it earned a horrific name: Golgotha – the skull. No wonder it has become a site for executions, no wonder it is surrounded by a city of tombs. On this Rock they crucify Jesus between two criminals. Luke takes us from the outer edge of the crowd to the foot of the cross.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the King of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Luke 23:35-39

Why doesn't Jesus save Himself? This will prove He has the love of God. This will prove He has the power of God. He has the power to avoid, attack, deny or desert like the disciples. From the rock of Gethsemane where they put Him in chains, to the rock of the Temple where they put Him on trial, to the rock of Golgotha where they put Him to death – at any moment He has the power to save Himself. Why doesn't He?

He wants to. On the rock of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." (Luke 22:42) This prayer reveals God the Son is also human to the core. He feels real fear, anxiety and dread. It isn't the arrest, the torture, or the disgraceful death He fears. It's what is in the cup. His Father holds out to Him a cup that brims over with all the suffering and sin of the world: Hiroshima, Auschwitz, 9/11, the Black Plague, every evil in human history. Jesus knows He will have to drink it to the dregs. And He will have to take the cup alone.

From Gethsemane to Golgotha, for the first time Jesus experiences the silence of God. Throughout His ministry, Jesus often communed with His Father in prayer. We began this Follow series with the Father telling His Son, "You are my Beloved" at His baptism. The Father said the same at His transfiguration. But now the Father offers the cup in silence. In this hour of darkness and decision, there are no words. Without any answer from His Father, Jesus speaks into the silent darkness, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42) If the storm is coming, I'm ready.

When I visit someone who is going through a storm, the question I often hear is “Why me? Why am I suffering?” What can I say to such a cry except, “I don’t know”? In this world where sin and evil run wild, I do not believe there is always a reason for suffering. But does God care? Does He understand my pain? Most assuredly yes. The Son of God felt the fear, the pain and the silence that we feel. There is not a drop of suffering in this world He has not tasted from that cup. There is not a sin in this world He did not bear on that Cross. God is with you in the storm. He knows. He understands. He cares. Even in the silence, He is on His knees beside you.

“And what is God doing about my pain?” We see from Gethsemane to Golgotha that God’s will is not always to take away the suffering. Yet it is God’s will to ultimately bring good out of evil, light out of darkness, life out of death. For by the death of His Son, the greatest suffering this world has ever seen, the Father saves our lives. One of the criminals on Skull hill said “Save yourself and us.” Jesus did not save Himself so He could save us. Just as He took Barabbas’ place so He took our place on the Cross.

In the storm swirling around Skull-hill that dark Friday, there was only one person who understood – the thief dying on the other cross. To his partner in crime he said,

“Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:40-43

When the storms of suffering come, the answer is not to fight or take flight but to fall on your knees and build your life on the rock solid foundation of Jesus Christ.

The rock of Golgotha rises from a quarry. Today it is under the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. During our visit last summer, I had the rare opportunity to go behind the walls and see the chisel marks where masons cut blocks of stone which may have been used to build the Temple over the Foundation Stone. At some point, the builders abandoned the quarry leaving behind the Skull, the place of the crucifixion. This rejected rock became a sacred stone, the new Foundation Stone. And thus were fulfilled the words of a psalm that was sung on Palm Sunday:

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes Psalm 118:22-23

Jesus is the rejected Rock. Build your life on His Foundation Stone so when the storms of life strike, you will be able to stand.