

The Cornerstone

Psalm 118:14-24

Acts 10:34-43

If we were to place the container cargo ship Evergiven on 7th St., with its bow at the corner of Larry Bird Ave., its stern would lay a quarter of a mile south, at the public library. Its height, from the keel resting on the blacktop to its deck, would tower over the peak of our roof. (Note this refers only to the deck. The superstructure would rise up half again as far.) If we were to snug one side up against our building's front, the beam (or width) would extend into the courtyard on the other side of the administration building across the street. Container cargo ships are the largest mobile machines ever devised by humanity. Last week high winds blew the Evergiven's bow sideways, driving it into the mud and rip rap lining the eastern wall of the Suez Canal. The stern lodged against the western wall. It took a week to unstuck the ship. The disruption to shipping caused a multi-billion dollar shock to worldwide economies.

Does your life ever feel you have turned sideways and gotten stuck in the mud? Do you ever feel your failure to move damages and delays others? Build on the cornerstone. Do so and you cannot be blown off course.

King David wrote Psalm 118 after winning a victory he attributed to the Lord's intervention. Scholars disagree over the form of this victory. Until about 80 years ago

most assumed it was military; based, however, on scholarship by the formidable Mitchell Dahood, commentators now believe King David gave thanks in this poem following his recovery from a deathly illness. Regardless, it has since New Testament times been one of the Psalms families sing around the Seder table during their Passover celebrations. Our verses contain a call and response between the king (sung by the family patriarch) and the temple priests (sung by all other family members). “The Lord is my strength and my salvation,” sings the king. He continues to praise the Lord's work until he demands the gates of the city be opened to him, “that I might enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.”

The people respond, “This is the gate of the Lord, only the righteous may enter through it.” (This translation, which varies slightly from our Revised Standard Version, comes from Dahood.) The king sings back to the effect that the Lord's vindication has made him righteous enough to enter. And how has God done this? “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” King David sees himself as that stone, deemed unacceptable to the builders (human power brokers) but used by the Lord to build not just the temple, nor even the city walls, but the whole nation of Israel. (Humility was apparently not one of David's virtues.)

In our times cornerstones serve only ceremonial functions. They have nothing to do with a building's foundation, appearing as they do as part of a wall at about human knee height. To ancient Hebrew masons, however, the structural integrity of the whole building depended on finding the right cornerstone. The first stone laid, the

cornerstone established the proper angles and formed a key part of an interlocking system to support the entire project. Yes, King David did see himself as that crucial to Israel—and to God's plans for it.

Though both Simon Peter and Paul quote Psalm 118:22 elsewhere in the New Testament, Peter did not directly reference it in the passage we just read from Acts. It makes no matter. The concept supports his thought just as surely as a cornerstone supported a building. Peter “opened his mouth” (Acts 10:34) because a Roman officer named Cornelius had seen a vision in which an angel told him to send for Peter. Cornelius, a Gentile, had earned a reputation as a godly man. It seemed God wished to reward him. Peter answered the summons. (Luke, the author of Acts, rather dryly tells us Cornelius greeted Peter with, “you have been kind enough to come,” as though any subject of the Empire could possibly refuse.) Cornelius told Peter he wanted to hear “all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” Peter told him.

He began, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality.” Having already received his vision of a net descending from heaven with both kosher and non-kosher food in it, and a voice telling him to feast on all of it, Peter knew that salvation through Jesus Christ belonged to all the nations. Still, Jesus was a Jew, fulfilling the words of the Hebrew prophets. He came preaching Good News throughout Judea. God gave him the power of his own Holy Spirit. He “did good and healed all that were oppressed by the devil. “They” put him to death “by hanging him on a tree.” But God resurrected him. “And he commanded us to preach...and to testify that he is...to be judge of the

living and the dead.” Peter concluded by proclaiming that every one who believes in Jesus “receives forgiveness of sins.”

That offer still stands. Though Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders, the man the Jews and Romans conspired to crucify, he has become the foundation of our salvation. Upon faith in him is the church built. He is the Rock. And here would be the time to remind ourselves that Simon was actually Peter’s given name. Jesus renamed him Peter. Peter comes from Latin. It means “rock”. Acts 10 concludes with Cornelius and his entire household confessing their **faith** in Jesus—standing on the Rock—and getting baptized.

Build on the cornerstone. Build on your faith in the risen Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. His resurrection is, of course, the primary point of Easter. But the point of the resurrection is to show forth his power over death, that we might believe in him as the Messiah and have life. Build on that cornerstone. Unsticking the Evergiven required excavating thousands of cubic yards of sandy muck, unloading dozens of cargo containers (the very same colorful stacked boxes we see passing before us when we get railroaded), and the rising of the tide from the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Only then could tug boats push and pull it out of trouble. What will it take to unstick your faith? So often we find Scripture calling us to serve others. We have just completed a Lenten study series on Jesus’ pointed call to serve the “least of these”. (Though we have emphatically not completed our plan to **take action** on this call.) Today, though, we find Peter calling us to believe in Jesus as the risen Savior.

Paraphrasing Paul, if God is for us, who are we not to work on our own faith?

Build on the rock-solid foundation of faith. Do what works for you to build your faith in Jesus, and Him resurrected. We speak often of the spiritual disciplines, of Bible study, prayer and mission work. Today we lift up a less frequently cited source of faith-building. Early last week I posted a short blog column on finding encouragement in my faith through the majesty and beauty of creation. I wrote of the perfection of the full moon and its motions through the heavens, and of the joy of witnessing the first face-to-face meeting of our infant granddaughter and her great-grandmother, my mom. I cannot recall anything I've ever written getting more, and more heart-felt, reaction. People just keep reaching out to me. Many told their own stories of how the natural world or people have helped them believe in God.

Whatever works best for you to grow your faith in the risen Jesus ***do that***. Whether it be those spiritual disciplines, or moons and grandchildren, or fellowship with your fellow believers, or whatever works for you, intentionally employ those things that build your faith. Lay that cornerstone. Jesus died and rose from the dead ***so people would believe in him as Savior and know life***. Do what you must to get that faith for yourself.