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LENTEN SERIES  
MAR 6 - APR 17

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A STORY IN  
**STONES**



## Discussion questions for week 1: Stumbling Stones

1. What stood out to you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Does the metaphor of God as the Rock resonate with you? Why, or why not? What other metaphors for God in Scripture or in nature do you like, and why?
3. If you were a rock, what kind of rock would you be? What do you like about your rock, and what would you like to see change?
4. Read the well-known story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11.
  - How have you interpreted this passage in the past? How has your thinking about this story changed over time?
  - Why do you think this time was important to Jesus?
  - Since Jesus was alone during these 40 days, he must have relayed this story to his disciples. Why do you think he did so, and what do you think he wanted them to learn?
5. The speaker on Sunday talked about Lent being a time for us to notice the background elements in our lives—like rocks and stones in the dry Judean desert where Jesus was tempted. Are there things about which you think “that’s just who I am” or “that’s just how life is” that you would actually like to see change?
6. Read Colossians 3:1-14 in the Message version. Paul here talks about being “clothed” in Christ. Is there a relationship or situation in your life where you need to take off “ill-fitting clothes” and dress in “compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline”? Share briefly with the group.
7. Reflecting on your answers to questions 5 and 6, take some time to pray for one another.

### Practice for the week: Reflecting on Stones

Go for a walk one day this week, and collect a few stones or pebbles from along the way. Take them home and wash them; examine them closely. What textures do you feel as you hold them? What colors do you see? Think about the processes that formed these rocks over millions of years. Thank God for the wonders of creation, and ask God to speak to you personally through the varied metaphors of rocks and stones. Record your thoughts and, if appropriate, share them with your group next week.

## Discussion questions for week 2: Rejected Stone

1. What resonated with you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Read Matthew 21:33-43. Who do you think the various characters in the story represent, and why do you think Jesus tells this story?
3. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What similarities do you see with the story Jesus told above? How do you think this would have made the religious leaders feel? How does this passage make you feel? How would you describe the fruit your life yields?
4. Read Isaiah 27:2-6. How does this passage make you feel in light of your reflection on your own fruitfulness?
5. In the story Jesus told, he quotes Psalm 118:22-23 and describes himself as a cornerstone. What does this metaphor mean to you, and why does Jesus use it? What are some patterns in your own life that are based on the template of Jesus' way of love? What are some patterns that seem less grounded in Jesus' way of love?
6. Why do you think Jesus was rejected as a "cornerstone"? In what ways might you have rejected (or been resistant to) Jesus as a cornerstone, and why?
7. Read Isaiah 27:2-6 again and spend some time in quiet personal reflection on this invitation into hope, love and transformation in light of the previous discussions. Open your heart to ways you need to be more grounded in Jesus and his way of love. Then each share your reflections with the group, and spend some time praying for one another.

### Practice for the week: The Examen

Our theme for this week has been grounding our lives in Jesus' way of love. The metaphor of the cornerstone represents the way in which Jesus is a template and a pattern of living for us. This week take some time each evening to reflect on your day, seeking to be aware of times when your thoughts, behaviors and actions were grounded in Jesus' way of love, and times when they were not.

The Examen is a helpful technique for this—it's an ancient Ignatian practice that helps develop greater awareness and consciousness of how we are giving and receiving God's love. Sit quietly alone and take a moment to center yourself. Then "re-live" your day in your imagination by allowing your thoughts to guide you through the day's events. As you do this, focus particularly on your interactions with others—in your family, at work or school, in your neighborhood or online. These "interactions" might be your internal thoughts or attitudes, or they could be actual conversations and encounters. Do this without judging yourself, but simply notice and ask the following two questions:

At what times during your day were your thoughts and actions grounded in Jesus' way of love?

- What happened?
- How were you grounded, and what empowered you in this way?

- Were you aware of this grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What was the outcome?

At what times during your day were you resistant or “ungrounded”?

- What happened, and in what way were you ungrounded?
- Were you aware of this lack of grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What were your feelings or beliefs about the situation and any person(s) involved, including yourself and God?
- How would being more conscious and grounded in Jesus’ way of love have made a difference in this situation for you?

When you have finished reflecting on your day, continue to sit quietly without self-judgment. Invite God’s presence and allow yourself to sink deeply into God’s total acceptance—feel this love as the ground of your whole being. Invite God to empower you to live more consciously from this “groundedness” tomorrow.

## Discussion questions for week 3: Throwing Stones

1. What stood out to you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Read John 7:53-8:11. Is there anything about this passage that disturbs you? Is there anything that inspires you? Is there one of the individuals/groups you relate to most right now?
3. The speaker on Sunday talked about how Jesus was a buffer for the vulnerable woman against a powerful group of men. Do you agree with that observation, or do you see it differently? Have you been in a situation when you needed a buffer or when you were able to serve as a buffer for a person in a vulnerable position? What makes it challenging to serve in this kind of role?
4. Do you agree with the speaker that we live in a "stone-throwing culture"? If so, what do you think has led to the animosity, condemnation, and intense criticism that seem so prevalent? Do you find it relatively easy or difficult to avoid getting caught up in the intensity? What has helped you experience growth in this area?
5. Read Matthew 7:3-5. In this teaching, Jesus suggests that "removing the speck from your brother's eye" may be appropriate and healing, but calls for humble self-examination and growth first. How has healthy self-reflection helped you relate to people with whom you have conflict or differences? In your opinion, what's the difference between "removing the speck" from someone else's eye and "throwing stones" at them? How do we make sure that any efforts to help someone don't end up hurting them?
6. In John 8:9-10, how did Jesus's conversation with the woman exhibit his commitment to both grace and truth, compassion and constraint, mercy and morality? Has your experience with religion tended to favor one of those elements over the other? How does Jesus's integration of grace and truth shape your relationship with God?
7. Based on today's discussion, take some time to pray for one another.

### **Practice for the week: Dropping your stone**

Set aside some time for quiet reflection. Hold a stone in your fist and prayerfully examine whether or not you are harboring condemning thoughts towards another person or towards yourself. As you reflect on the non-condemning mercy and grace of Jesus, ask God to help you soften your heart and loosen your grip on the stone. When you can, open your hand and allow the stone to drop to the floor.

## Discussion questions for week 4: Living Stones

1. What stood out to you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Do churches or cathedrals give you a sense of God's presence? Why or why not? Are there other places that communicate God's presence to you? What are they, and why do you think they have that effect on you?
3. Read Genesis 28:10-22.
  - How do you understand Jacob's dream?
  - What does Jacob's response to the dream tell us about his view of God?
  - Has there been a time in your life where you were particularly aware of God's presence with you? What happened, and how did it impact you?
4. The tabernacle—and the temple, which followed the pattern of the tabernacle—was divided into 3 areas: an external court, a holy place, and a holy of holies. It was made with costly materials and furnished with sacred golden objects.
  - What do you think the tabernacle/temple communicated about how Israel viewed God?
  - If you designed a place where people could meet with God, what would it look like, and why?
5. Read John 2:13-22. What does this passage tell us about how Jesus viewed the temple?
6. Read Ephesians 2:19-22 and 1 Peter 2:4-5.
  - What does it mean for followers of Jesus to be "living stones"?
  - What does it mean in everyday life for us to be "built together to become a dwelling" for God?
  - In what way is this encouraging for you?
  - In what way is this challenging for you?
7. Reflecting on your answers to question 6, take some time to pray for one another.

### Practice for the week: Carrying the presence of God

Carry a small stone in your pocket this week. Each time you touch it or feel its weight in your pocket, remember you are carrying God's presence with you. You are a holy place. Each morning read the Message version of Ephesians 2:19-22 (below) and ask God to help you bring divine love, acceptance and healing to each person you meet today.

*Ephesians 2:19b-22 (MSG)*

*God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.*

## Discussion questions for week 5: Foundation Stone

1. What resonated with you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Our theme this week is about developing stable, rock-like qualities in our lives. What are some areas in your own life where you feel steady, secure, and stable? How did you grow to become that way? What are some areas where you feel more unstable or unsteady?
3. Read Matthew 16:13-20. Why do you think the writer of Matthew sets this story in the location of Caesarea-Philippi? Why do you think Jesus asks his followers who they think he is at this juncture? What kind of "power struggle" is going on here, and why is it significant?
4. Jesus calls Peter a "rock" and someone he trusts and believes in. Given what we know about Peter from the gospels (and other writings in the Christian Scriptures), do you think Jesus' faith in Peter is justified? What does this say about our own lives and Jesus' belief in us? How might this affect our own self-belief in our various life experiences?
5. Read Matthew 16:21-23. Why do you think Jesus now calls Peter "Satan" (having just called him a "rock")? In what way is Peter a stumbling block? What kind of Messiah is Jesus claiming to be? In what ways do our own sensibilities, fears and desires block this kind of messianic way?
6. Read Matthew 16:24-26. What would "taking up your cross" have meant to the listeners in first century Palestine? What does the same concept look like practically in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America?
7. Lent is a season of self-denial: not based on a sense of self-hatred, but on the hope that love can and will transform us—that we can be the people Jesus believes we can be. Take a few moments in quietness to reflect on your own life, and the areas where its natural momentum of thought, belief and behavior needs to change. What would self-denial look like for you in these areas, and how could you practice it?
8. Take a moment to share your personal reflections together and then spend some time praying for one another.

### **Practice for the week: Believing in ourselves just like Jesus does**

Take some time this week to consciously practice self-belief. This is not based in pride or self-centeredness, but in an endeavor to see ourselves the way Jesus sees us, and to be rocks (a source of strength and stability) for others, no matter what situation we are in.

Each morning, take a moment to sit quietly and center yourself in whatever way feels appropriate for you. Reflect on the day ahead, and especially any difficult or challenging situations you are anticipating. Think especially about situations where you are not feeling confident, and worry you might be inadequate. Now open your mind and heart to God, and receive God's love for you. Over the next few minutes, breath this in as complete affirmation and confidence in you. Now imagine yourself in those various situations as one who is totally loved, secure and full of God's Spirit. Don't try to be someone you are not, just accept yourself as you are, and one who is enough because you are flowing in the way

of love. Remind yourself of this in each situation during the day, and intentionally turn your consciousness away from any of your own perceived inadequacies to focus on being a support, an encouragement, and a help (a “rock”) to others.



## Discussion questions for week 6: Singing Stones

1. What stood out to you from the message on Sunday? Was there anything that seemed relevant to your current situation? Was there anything you disagreed with or found uncomfortable?
2. Did you grow up celebrating Palm Sunday? If so, did you have any family traditions? What memories do you have of past Easter celebrations?
3. Read Luke 19:28-40, and John 12:12-18. Then discuss the following:
  - In John's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he simply writes: "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it" (John 12:14). Why do you think Luke (in addition to Mark and Matthew) goes into such detail about where the donkey came from?
  - In Luke's account we read that the people lay their cloaks on the ground. In John's Gospel we read they waved palm branches. What is the significance of these two actions? What do these actions tell us about who the crowd believed Jesus to be?
  - In John's account, the crowd shouts, "Hosanna!" which means "Save us now!" or "Save us, we beg you." What do you think the people wanted saving from?
4. How did Jesus fail to live up to the crowd's expectations? How did they react? Has God ever failed to live up to your expectations? How did you react?
5. Read Luke 19:41-44. Why did Jesus weep? How does this passage relate to the crowd's expectations of Jesus? What does it tell us about peace?
6. Read Zechariah 9:9-10. Why does the prophet tell the people to rejoice?
7. Imagine you were transported back to the time of Jesus and found yourself in the crowd at the east gate of Jerusalem. What do you think you would feel? What would you do?
8. Take some time to share about an area of your life about which (i) you want to celebrate, or (ii) you want to shout "Hosanna! Save us now!" or (iii) you long for peace. Pray for one another.

### Practice for the week: Listening to stones

Ancient Jewish culture viewed stones as witnesses that heard what was said around them and could speak out in judgment. Jesus said that if his disciples did not praise God, the stones would cry out—whether he meant in joyful praise or in judgment, we do not know.

During this week, stop to make note of stones in different places (your home, your workplace, at the Capitol, in Ukraine, etc.) If those stone could speak, what would they say? What might they say in judgment? What praise might they offer up to God? Talk to Jesus about what you "hear" the stones crying out.