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Today in our journey through the books of the Bible, we come to the book of 1st Peter.

Peter was a fisherman. He and his wife lived in Capernaum (the largest of about 30 fishing villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee. One day he and his brother Andrew were fishing when they met Jesus. (Jn. 1:35-42; Mt. 4:18) Overwhelmed by the supernatural catch of fish after an all nighter that yielded nothing, Peter responded to the invitation of Jesus to become fishers of men. He was one of Jesus closest friends and while trusting him, walked on water. And although in a moment of fear he denied knowing Christ, he was the first to recognize him as Messiah and later responded to the commission by Jesus to '*Feed my Sheep.*' (John 21:17) Peter is the spokesman for the church at Jerusalem. The first to speak at Pentecost preaching a sermon that pierced 3000 hearts. The first apostolic miracle was done by Peter when he healed the crippled beggar. He was also the first to speak up for the Gentiles before the council of Jerusalem and later appointed as the preacher to the Jews. (Gal. 2:7; Eph. 2:20)"¹

When Jesus asked who do men say that I am. Peter replied '*Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.*' (Matthew 16:16) Reflecting his confession, Jesus changed Peter's name from Simon (meaning hearing) to Peter meaning rock or stone. (Lk 6:14; John 1:42)

Sometimes there's great power in a name. One day a frog goes into a bank and approaches the teller. He can see from her nameplate that her name is Patricia Whack. 'Miss Whack, I'd like to get a \$30,000 loan to take a holiday.' Patty looks at the frog in disbelief and asks his name. The frog says his name is Kermit Jagger, his dad is Mick Jagger, and that it's okay, he knows the bank manager. Patty explains that he will need to secure the loan with some collateral. The frog says, 'Sure. I have this' and produces a tiny porcelain elephant, about an inch tall, bright pink and perfectly formed. Very confused, Patty explains that she'll have to consult with the bank manager and disappears into a back office. She finds the manager and says 'There's a frog called Kermit Jagger out there who claims to know you and wants to borrow £30,000 and he wants to use this as collateral.' She holds up the tiny pink elephant. 'I mean, what in the world is this?' The bank manager looks back at her and says.....'It's a knickknack, Patty Whack. Give the frog a loan. His old man's a Rolling Stone.'

All kidding aside, stones have great significance, and have been used in the Bible for many things.

- When the Hebrews were delivered from slavery in Egypt, they were led by God through the wilderness toward the promised land. As they formed a new community they were in need of guidance and direction. God spoke to them through the words he engraved on two stone tablets which contained the Ten Commandments. (Duet. 2:7-8)
- When Israel was under attack by the Philistines, led by a giant named Goliath, a young boy named David came out to fight him and with a small stone he beat the unbeatable. (1Sam. 17:48-50)
- When the children of Israel ended their journey in the wilderness they were filled with excitement as they were finally about to reach the Promised Land and start their new life. But there was a problem, when they reached the Jordan River it was at flood stage and un-crossable. But God performed a miracle stopping up the water; he gave them

¹ www.abu,nb.,ca/ecm/Pet10a.htm

dry ground to cross over on. (Josh. 3:14-17) When they all made it safely to the other side, some men went back into the middle of the river and collected some stones from the river bottom. They stood up twelve stones one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel and put them in their campsite in Gilgal. (Josh 4:1-24)

After standing up the stones, Joshua told the Israelites, "When your descendants ask their fathers 'what do these stones mean?' tell them the story, that 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground. For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you crossed over.'" (Josh. 4:21-23a)

Now it was custom in the Middle East for pagans to erect huge stones to honor their gods. Any traveler who saw these standing stones knew that something supernatural had happened there. (*New Interpreters Bible*) Joshua erected these stones to be a permanent witness to what God had done.

This gives us some context for what Peter says in our sermon text which is from ch 2:5-6;

1st Peter 2:5b-6 (NLT)

"Come to Christ, who is the *living cornerstone* of God's temple. He was rejected by the people, but he is precious to God who chose him. And now God is building you, as *living stones*, into his spiritual temple. (2:4-5a) What's more, you are God's holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ. As the Scriptures express it, "I am placing a stone in Jerusalem, a chosen cornerstone, and anyone who believes in him will never be disappointed." (2:5b-6)

Written as a letter of encouragement to the Christians in the provinces of Asia Minor, about 60 A.D. First Peter is a call to holy living during difficult times. It says that faith is not just about believing it's about behaving (2:8). So much of the N.T. talks about how we as a church should get along with each other. First Peter talks about how we as believers should get along with unbelievers.

The folks who lived around these early Christians that were identified as non-believers did not believe in Jesus. But religion played a very important role in the daily life of the people and was centered around a variety of different gods and explanations for events that usually involved the gods in some way or another. The Romans believed that gods controlled their lives and, as a result, spent a great deal of their time worshipping them.

Each family home would also have a small altar and shrine. They had personal household gods or spirits called 'lares' which were worshipped every day at home. The shrine contained statues of the 'lares' and the head of the household led family prayers around the shrine each day. The service was considered so important that family slaves were also invited.

We're talking about a huge clash in belief systems. As the Christians would not participate in the rites and rituals that involved the gods of the state religion. Part of the problem was that after converting to Christianity Roman wives were leaving their husbands, slaves were running away and folks were rebelling against the system. So, chapters 2-3 include words of instruction to slaves whose masters who were not believers, to wives with husbands who were not believers and to the church at large living with neighbors who were not believers.

The purpose of this writing was to encourage and instruct believers on how to live with in the realities of a difficult situation at home, at work, in our relationships and even in our suffering.

Peter includes practical helps for how to effectively live our faith in a way that makes a difference. He says;

- It's great that you believe but keep growing in what you believe. (1:13-16)
 - Remember God has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. (1:17a)
 - Show respect for people in authority, show respect for your boss
 - Be honest, work with integrity (Ch 2)
 - Don't be hateful, spiteful or sneaky. Don't be jealous, vengeful or a phony.
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- Do you have a boss that's difficult to work for? If you choose to work for them, Peter says do what's right, serve them well even if they are harsh and unreasonable.
 - Even in the worst situations in the worst jobs, we need to be aware of how our behavior reflects our faith to a watching world.
 - Know that our faith is reflected in how we treat the people in our lives.
 - Peter says If you as a wife are a believer and your husband is not, live with him in a way that might win him over, not by lecturing him but let your actions do your talking for you, because actions speak louder than words.
 - It doesn't make sense to talk about the Bible and what you believe and then turn around and live in a way that denies what you say you believe. This advice is for everyone.
 - Peter says wives don't be obsessed with outward beauty because true beauty comes from within, from a gentle and cooperative spirit.
 - Husbands honor your wife. Treat her with understanding. You are equal partners in God's grace. He includes a warning saying, "And...If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard!"
 - All of this to say that what happens behind closed doors matters to God and he is watching.
 - We should all be of one mind, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds.

The church was under persecution and much of what Peter says is framed in the context of suffering: (ch 3-4) He says, "Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world." (4:12-13)

And, "...There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials will test your faith and show that it is strong. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world." (1:3-7)

Some of the fiery trials that Peter mentions may have been realized just 4 years later in the burning of Rome. "During the night of July 18, 64 AD, fire broke out in the merchant area of the city of Rome. The flames quickly spread through the city and consumed everything in its path for six days and seven nights leaving seventy percent of the city in ruins. Rumors arose accusing Emperor Nero of torching the city. The people were outraged and ready to revolt so Nero quickly looked around for a scapegoat. He found it in the Christians. Roman historian Tacitus said the Christians were thought of as a cult that was accused of cannibalism because they talked of getting together in their houses, drinking someone's blood and eating his body."...referencing the language of the Lord's Supper....they greeted one another with a holy

kiss, shared their innermost problems with each other which soon became enlarged into fantastic stories. So, they were a people already under suspicion.²

Since people were suspicious of the Christians, you can see why Peter told the church to, “Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. So that even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior and they will believe and give honor to God.” (2:12)

Nero ordered the arrest of a few Christians who under torture, accused others until the entire Christian populace was implicated...As many Christians as could be found were rounded up and put to death in the most horrific manner for the amusement of the citizens of Rome.³ They were; tied to chariots and dragged through the streets until they were dead; they were thrown to the lions; tied up in leather bags and thrown into the water so that when the leather bags shrank they were squeezed to death; they were nailed to crosses and dipped in tar and burned as torches to light the night sky in Nero’s gardens

It was terrible, I scaled down the description of the persecutions so as not to be too graphic, but they were suffering. Imagine how they heard Peter’s words about fiery trials.

Sometimes we hesitate to share our faith with others because we don’t know how they will react or what they will think of us. A few weeks ago, Judy Turpin and I took the train into Boston to visit a parishioner in the hospital. While we were waiting for one of our connections, a gentleman stood on the platform playing his fiddle and singing.

When he finished his song he began to speak in a loud voice telling everyone standing there the message of the gospel and inviting people to ask Jesus to be their Savior. He was clearly not concerned with what people thought of him. Imagine though if we lived in a time and place where if Christians were discovered they were caught and killed, would that have influenced his approach? How would that impact how we lived if being found out could lead to death.

Peter said, don’t be quiet, don’t hide your faith even in the face of suffering and don’t be surprised by suffering –Christians sometimes think they are exempt from suffering or that it’s a sign that God’s not with them, but it’s not, it’s part of living in this world. But, he said, be assured that Jesus knows what we are going through since he himself suffered.

What we do and the way we live has lasting impact on those around us. On a TV show I was watching recently, a bride to be was having lunch with her maid of honor. As they talked the maid of honor blurted out that she didn’t like the dress she was supposed to wear for the wedding and further more, she didn’t think the groom to be was the right man for the bride and told her why. The bride said “why are you telling me all of this now?” and her friend said, “because I’m dying and I wanted you to know the truth.” She said it was time to get real and be honest with herself and those she loved. She wanted to be true to what she believed. In the face of dying, she found the courage to really start living.

² Carrington, Phillip, *The Early Christian Church* (1957); Davis, William Stearns, *Readings in Ancient History* (1913); Duruy, Victor, *History of Rome and the Roman People*, vol V (1883). Nero Persecutes the Christians, 64 AD.,

³ Duruy, Victor, *History of Rome* vol. V (1883); Grant, Michael (translator), *Tacitus, The Annals of Imperial Rome*, (1989) “The Burning of Rome, 64 AD,” *EyeWitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (1999).

Part of being a strong visible image to those around us includes being true to what we believe. It's in the most trying of times when we are confronted with what we really believe in our heart of hearts. It is also in times of suffering when we become a witness to our inner convictions.

There are folks in this church who have been through and are going through overwhelming trials...with the jobs, their children, in their marriages, folks who have lost a loved one, struggled with illness and even faced death themselves. Through dark nights and uncertain days, I have watched these folks display enormous faith and trust in God. They have been witnesses of God's love in a way that inspires us all to greater faith. This is part of how we make it through difficult times, by encouraging and drawing strength from each other.

As living stones we stand for something. We stand for Christ who is the Cornerstone. Even as the stones that Joshua stood up could be seen by all who passed by, we too are seen everyday.

A short time after his writing, Peter was arrested, imprisoned and martyred for his message. Yet the words of God spoken through him continue to inspire believers of every generation living in difficult times.

A living stone is living faith. Peter would say, even in the face of suffering, even when life is difficult, what I want you to do is to stand tall by doing the right thing, respecting those in authority, working with honesty and integrity, being consistent and loving our family, remembering God sees what happens behind closed doors. It means doing our best even for a difficult boss. It means being true to what we believe. It means doing what's right when the heat is on even if others snicker. Sometimes it means standing alone when the crowds going the wrong way, sometimes it means standing up for our faith even if it draws suspicion, it may mean holding our tongue and reviewing our priorities. It means encouraging and really loving each other, and it always means being aware of how others might perceive our actions and being ready to tell our story if we are asked.

When King Solomon was building the Temple of the Lord, the Scriptures say he used finished stone. Each stone is carefully chosen and placed just where it belongs according to the will of the builder. Peter says that each of us has been cut or hewn by the Master Builder and that we have been purposefully and perfectly placed just where he wants us.

Whether we're at work, school, at home or at play, living our faith isn't always easy. When you need to find your way; when you need a new beginning; when you're facing trials, when you are challenged by unbelievers or being treated unfairly...When you're standing with your toes in the Jordan and it looks un-crossable, look up, look for the stones that God has placed around you in your life, they're there.

At a time when Peter needed to point the church to a visible image, a reminder of what God had done what God could do; he couldn't point them toward Joshua's stones. And he didn't need to, he said to them, as he says to us...today you are those stones...living stones. Stand tall wherever you are. You represent the living God to a watching world.

LET'S PRAY;

Dear God, thank you for the words of Peter that encourage us with the reminder of your presence and challenge us to live accordingly. Help us to really be conscious of the choices we make, the way we live and the affect we have on those who are watching us. Show us if there are parts of our behavior that are not helpful. Help us in our conduct to be a positive witness

ready to do the right thing. Help us to be living stones that provide strength and encouragement to each other. Help us to be a visible symbol of hope for those who are facing trials or are suffering. Help us to stand tall and to be ready to share the good news of your grace with those who may ask us.