

Isaiah 28:14–16 (CEB)

¹⁴ **Therefore**, hear the LORD’s word,
you scoffers who rule this people
in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ You said, “We’ve cut a deal with death;
with the underworld we made a pact.
When the overflowing flood
passes through, it won’t reach us;

for we have made lies our hiding place,
and in falsehood we take shelter.”

¹⁶ **Therefore**, the LORD God says:
Look! I’m laying in Zion a stone,
a tested stone, a valuable cornerstone,
a sure foundation:
the one who trusts won’t tremble.

Matthew 21:33–46 (CEB)

³³ “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. ³⁴ When it was time for harvest, he sent his servants to the tenant farmers to collect his fruit. ³⁵ But the tenant farmers grabbed his servants. They beat some of them, and some of them they killed. Some of them they stoned to death.

³⁶ “Again he sent other servants, more than the first group. They treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

³⁸ “But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come on, let’s kill him and we’ll have his inheritance.’ ³⁹ They grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰ “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?”

⁴¹ They said, “He will totally destroy those wicked farmers and rent the vineyard to other tenant farmers who will give him the fruit when it’s ready.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Haven’t you ever read in the scriptures, *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it’s amazing in our eyes?*”

⁴³ **Therefore**, I tell you that God’s kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Whoever falls on this stone will be crushed. And the stone will crush the person it falls on.”

⁴⁵ Now when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard the parable, they knew Jesus was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They were trying to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.

1 Peter 2:4–10 (CEB)

⁴ Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God’s perspective it is chosen, valuable. ⁵ You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ Thus it is written in scripture, *Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed.* ⁷ So God honors you who believe. For those who refuse to believe, though, the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone. ⁸ This is a stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall. Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble. Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God’s own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. ¹⁰ Once you weren’t a people, but now you are God’s people. Once you hadn’t received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

On what or on whom is your life built?

September 11 this year is, of course, the fifteenth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. More Americans were killed that day than were killed on D-Day. As a people, we were shocked and stunned. Weren’t we grateful that day for St. Andrew – a place to turn to, a people to be with. In times of crisis, we search for something or, better, someone upon we can rely, someone who can provide strength and security even as it seems the world is falling apart. We long for a true and solid foundation and because God loves us, despite our many failings, he has provided with a “tested stone, a cornerstone, a sure foundation,” his son, Jesus.

Therefore

When we open the pages of Scripture, it is always wise to pay special attention to the every “therefore” we find, and there are many. “Therefore” is a connector, linking what has been, to what follows as in “consequently” or “for that reason.” We tend to use “therefore” when we are trying to persuade or argue a point. I find the biblical writers and translators use it in the same way. Jesus is resurrected, Paul writes, “*therefore* your labor is never in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Same thing in today’s passage from Isaiah 28. God has set about to redeem humanity and restore creation through the Israelites, but they have proved to be very inadequate vessels. They have chosen the way of death (v. 15), *therefore* God is going to step in and provide a cornerstone, a sure foundation. What or who is this cornerstone? The passages from Matthew and 1 Peter both reveal that the cornerstone, the firm foundation, is Jesus Christ himself.

A confrontation

Today’s parable from Matthew is part of an extended confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leadership, represented by the temple priests and the Pharisees. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to adoring crowds on a Sunday (Matthew 21), which we call Palm Sunday. The first thing Jesus does after his arrival is to head for the temple, where he invokes the words and actions of the prophet Jeremiah, who, 600 years before, had his own confrontation with the temple leadership. The next morning, Jesus returns to the temple where the “chief priests and elders” question his authority. Whose authority underlies Jesus’ words and actions? The leaders know full well that Jesus says and does what only God ought to say and do and they want to know what or whom Jesus claims as his authority.

Jesus replies to this challenge by turning the tables and asking the “chief priests and elders” a question that they refuse to answer: “Who authorized the baptisms performed by John the Baptizer: heaven or humans?”¹ Then, in the face of their silence, Jesus launches into three parables.

The first one is about two sons. The first refuses to work in his father’s vineyard but later changes his mind and heads to the vines. The second son says he will go work, but he doesn’t. Jesus asks which man does his father’s will. The leaders can’t help but answer that it is the first, for, even though refusing at first, the man eventually goes to work. This first parable, like those that follow is a warning about God’s rejection of Israel’s leadership; i.e., the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and the rest. It is the “sinners and tax collectors” who, though rejecting God at first, now embrace Jesus and his inauguration of God’s kingdom. Conversely, like the second son, the leaders claim to be leading the people to God but are actually leading them away, refusing to do the work of the kingdom brought to them by Jesus. Then Jesus launches right into another parable, ours for today, often referred to as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

The wicked tenants

The context of this parable, falling in the midst of a direct confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, then guides our interpretation of the parable. The landowner is God and the vineyard is God’s people. Indeed, the parable’s first verse is based directly on Isaiah 5, a song about an unfruitful vineyard (an unjust people). Thus, the wicked tenants are not the people themselves, but the leaders, both spiritual and political, who have repeatedly refused to understand God’s Law and God’s work. Instead, they exile his prophets and rebel against his son. They reject the cornerstone provided by God and, thus, God rejects them, turning over the vineyard to others.

When the landowner turns the vineyard over to new management, it is God opening his kingdom to those who embrace both God’s work and God’s son. It is a mistake to see this

¹The chief priests can’t say “heaven” for that would be an endorsement of John and also Jesus. They can’t say “human,” for John’s movement was popular among the people. Jesus has a real gift for turning the tables on his accusers.

parable as speaking of God transferring the vineyard from the Jews to the Gentiles.² Rather, it is the Jewish leadership that is in Jesus' sight. Leadership of the vineyard is going to be given to a new crew, to those who will lead God's reconstituted people forward in a unity built on faith in Jesus Christ – the cornerstone and firm foundation!

A message for all

Jesus spoke this parable as a clear warning to those who had been leading Israel toward destruction rather than restoration. Jeremiah had confronted Israel's leaders and was imprisoned for it. Jesus' confrontation with them would lead him to a Roman cross only a few days later.

But it would be a mistake to hear this as a message only for the leaders. Had the Jews done what God had expected of them, loving God and neighbor? Had they embraced and protected Jeremiah? They had welcomed Jesus on Sunday when he rode into Jerusalem on a colt. Would they embrace him on Friday? Would the disciples themselves stand with him before the high priest, Caiaphas, or would they hide and even deny them knew him?

It can be so hard to know what you have when you've got it, much less act on it. How good are we at discerning God's word today and heeding it? Do we strive to learn more so that we can be more discerning? Do we see the world through God-shaped glasses or "real world" glasses? Do we run our lives based on the world's priorities or upon God's? Do we stand up for the weak and oppressed, for those who can't stand up for themselves. Do we really appreciate all that God had given us, even in the high-anxiety of the moment? Questions such as these are not only for the "leaders," they are questions for us all.

Trusting in God's cornerstone

Peter's point in today's passage from 1 Peter is similar. The world may reject the cornerstone, Jesus, but we are a "chosen people" set apart from the world so that we can

The Hope of Israel

The vineyard was a common Hebrew metaphor for Israel; not so much the land as the people. The people, Abraham's people, were the chosen of God, chosen for a purpose, to be the ones through whom God would rescue humanity and all the cosmos. Yet the people knew that they had not done well as God's vineyard, finding it impossible to simply love God and love neighbor every day and in every way. They saw the Babylonian exile as punishment for their sins, and the Roman soldiers were a daily reminder that they continued to live in a very real exile, despite having returned to the land.

Yet, in the midst of exile and alienation, prophets had brought powerful words of hope to the Jewish community living in Babylon and after their return. What were the dimensions of this hope?

Israel's hope was focused on the end of the exile which entailed three expectations: (1) liberation from oppression, (2) the restoration of the land, and (3) the rebuilding of the temple. All three expectations pointed toward the restoration of the people's relationship with the Lord God, to the forgiveness of Israel's sins, and to a new covenant.

It is easy to see why many would have thought that the exile was ending when Cyrus allowed the Jews to begin returning home. But as time went on their hopes would be crushed. Yes, they were back on the land but it was occupied by foreigners. Indeed, the Jews were oppressed by one conqueror after another for centuries. Yes, they were allowed to rebuild the temple, but it was a pale reflection of the temple burned down by the Babylonians. As time passed, the Jews came to realize that the exile never really ended, that their sins had not been forgiven, that they still awaited their homecoming.

All this sets the stage for today's parable, in that it tells the story of Israel's rejection of the prophets' call to return to God and, now, the violent unwillingness of the Jewish leadership to embrace Jesus as Messiah, the one who would usher in the long-awaited kingdom of God.

²We always need to remember that the Jesus movement was a Jewish movement and would stay that way for several decades. It was more than ten years after Jesus' resurrection before a Gentile came to faith in Jesus Christ. None of the apostles, all of whom were Jewish, would have seen themselves as leaving Judaism. They simply had come to embrace Jesus as Lord and the very Jewish Messiah.

proclaim God's mighty acts.

Now, we live pretty cushy lives and we may pay little price for our faith and for living out our faith. But that was not the case for the believers Peter addresses in his circulating letter. These Christians in Asia Minor live on "the margins of respectable society" and have "become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt."³ These Christians are paying a steep social, economic, and personal price for placing their faith in Jesus Christ. What would you say to them about commitment? What would they say to us?

Peter begins his letter by reminding them of God's great mercy. The believers have been given "a new birth into a living hope" and "into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." The joy of salvation is theirs, Peter writes. Then, Peter urges them to live disciplined and holy lives, perhaps knowing that in times of stress, anxiety, and fear it is often God who goes first, pushed aside by the crises of the moment. In this week's passage, Peter calls on these believers to long for spiritual nourishment and embrace their new identity as God's chosen and holy people, knowing always why God has called them to his family.

God's people, a holy people

Peter writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands. Echoing God's word brought by Moses, Peter encourages them by reminding them of their place among God's people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians are a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge.⁴ They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply: Christians are to proclaim God's mighty acts.

What kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts, to build for God's kingdom? One way Peter talks about this is to describe the believers as "living stones." Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart" (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . ." (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God's people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can "proclaim God's mighty acts." Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged. . . . And we are to remember that we are part of something big. In a word, we are to be fully committed to the purpose for which God has saved us.

God has bestowed a great mercy on us, calling us to him and to his purposes. We at St. Andrew must never pull back in the face of tough times, but always push forward. We must strive to hear God's voice and let him lead us with renewed purpose. Like those believers long ago, we can hear Peter calling us to be a people of deep faith pursuing a holy purpose with love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage so that we may extend to others the mercy that God has extended to us. May we build our lives on the firm foundation that is Jesus Christ and ensure that we are good workers in God's vineyard.

³ Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans

⁴Not only are there many direct quotations of the OT in the New Testament, there are countless allusions and echoes. When Peter calls the believers a "holy nation" it is a loud echo of Exodus 19:6, but there is a very important difference. Moses brings a promise from God that is conditional: "If you obey my voice and keep you my covenant . . . you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. . ." In contrast, Peter simply states a fact: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . ." The covenant-keeping has been done for us by Jesus!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. One prophet after another. Mostly ignored. Some imprisoned or worse. Then, Jesus arrives and attracts both crowds and disciple. But, in the end, he too is abandoned, as we learn that the crowds are fickle and the disciples are clueless. The people of God seem quite sure about what this Messiah-led kingdom of God stuff is going to look like and they are anxious to get on with it. The one thing they also become quite sure of is that is not what Jesus is selling, as evidenced by his “losing” to Caiaphas and Pilate. In other words, they don’t know what they have when they’ve got it. You might begin reflecting on some occasions in your own life when you couldn’t see what you have until it is too late. Many of us with families have experienced this as we put work first, missing time with our kids that we cannot get back. What have you learned from such experiences? What might we do to guard against this?
2. Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith and even our lives. But how much does our life in Christ reflect that truth? What risks do you take? How committed are you to the purpose to which God has called? How is your commitment expressed? Do you think your friends and family would call you committed to Christ? What part does your giving play in our commitment? What holds you back from making a commitment to tithe? How about the giving of your time? How and where do you serve?
3. You might reflect upon and discuss your own understandings of our “holy purpose” as disciples of Jesus Christ. How might this purpose shape our lives as individuals and as a community of God’s people? What ought to be the purpose of St. Andrew? Martin Buber, a 20th century theologian spoke of “worldly power and holy purpose.” How can our holy purpose shape our use of worldly power? What are the dangers in our exercise of worldly power? How can we guard against these dangers?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 19:1-6 The passage echoed in 1 Peter 2:9-10</p>	<p>Tuesday, Acts 7 Stephen proclaims God’s mighty acts in his words . . . and in his death. How deep a commitment did he make?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 19:1-9 How is Zacchaeus proclaiming God’s mighty acts? What is he ready to commit to his new-found Lord?</p>	<p>Thursday, Ephesians 4:1-16 A passionate church is unified and mature.</p>
<p>Friday, Galatians 5:13-26 A passionate church lives by the Spirit.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

