

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
October 5, 2008; 21 Pentecost, Proper 22; Year A

Sermon: Matthew 21: 23-32 (Stones)

I learned something about falling on stone a couple of weeks ago. I was mountain biking with our kids in Moab, UT. The trail is called Porcupine Ridge, categorized as both “strenuous” and “technical.” “Technical” is code for “be really, really careful, because you can really, really fall.” Which I did. Just once, 3 miles into the 15-mile ride.

I remember getting into trouble. Looking ahead and seeing that I had no business riding this section. I hit the brakes hard – too hard on the front brake – and went over the handlebars. The stone path came at me quickly, but I was able to break the fall with my right hand. A good thing, since I ended up skinning my chin on the rock anyway.

Last Wednesday I got word from my doctor, who said that the X ray showed a fracture in my wrist. For the next month I get to wear this. So once again the truth of Scripture is confirmed in my life. Not only, “the one who falls on this stone will be broken.” But also Proverbs 28:26, “He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who *walks* in wisdom is kept safe.”

Interesting imagery, this stone. A friend in seminary preached on this, and while I took issue with some of her interpretations, I liked her take on the cornerstone:

When I think of a cornerstone,

I see a large, solid stone

sitting at the extreme corner of a building’s foundation,

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holding the rest of the building together.

*It's an image of solid-ness,
unshakeable-ness,
steadfastness,
and it's intimately connected to the other stones – literally.*

*You can't get **to** the cornerstone
because it's surrounded by other stones.
It doesn't move.*

*But this cornerstone that Jesus describes –
people can **fall** on it and be **broken** to pieces ...
**What are they doing –
running at full speed into the corner of a building??***

*Wouldn't the stone have to be out in the open,
by itself,
not where it's supposed to be ...
wouldn't it then be more like a **stumbling block**?*

*And this stone is not content to just sit out there in the open,
tripping people up;
it becomes an **active, aggressive stone**
(like in the Indiana Jones movie),
falling on people and crushing them.*

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Interesting imagery. But for the readers of Matthew's gospel, it would not have been nearly so puzzling. The quotation is from Ps 118: 22-23, following the Greek version of the OT called the Septuagint. The meaning of the quotation would have been clear to Matthew's readers from the overall thrust of the psalm.

Psalm 118 is a psalm of thanksgiving to God for victory in battle; a prayer of praise from the king. "All the nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! . . . I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." The sense of reversal is key. God has made the king of the Israelites triumph over the nations, their enemies. The stone, the king and people that were rejected, has become the chief cornerstone.

The quotations would have brought to mind more than this psalm. They recall words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 8: 14-15), "[The Lord of hosts] will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."

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So here we have the active, aggressive stone that is at one and the same time a sanctuary for some, and a stumbling block – a trap and a snare – for others. And many in Jerusalem will stumble, fall, and be broken. The context for Isaiah's prophesy was the Syro-Ephraimite war of the 8th century B.C.

If we wish to hear directly what those in the early Christian church made of these images, we need only turn to 1 Peter 2: 4-9, where Peter says:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

It's not hard to see how the early Church applied these Scripture passages to Jesus. The cornerstone. Unique, of principal importance, the head of the Church. Precious to some, and a stumbling block to others.

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When we think of the word cornerstone, not literally but figuratively, we think of something foundational, something definitive and indispensable. So for the Episcopal Church it would be . . . bishops! [OK, no snickering. I've long suspected some of you as closet Congregationalists:)]

Trying for a better example, politics came to mind. The cornerstones, if you will, of the Republican and Democratic Parties. Our recent turn of events makes this a bit confusing. Last Monday we had Democrats supporting President Bush's bailout of Wall Street and Republicans giving the legislation a tough time. Apparently it is now sorted out. But it still seems odd. Democrats helping bail out Wall Street. Republicans putting at risk 700 billion dollars of taxpayer money. Earmarks blatantly attached to garner votes. "Where have all the cornerstones gone?"

But in thinking about party cornerstones, it brought to mind parts of Doris Goodwin's book about Abraham Lincoln, Team of Rivals. Especially the formation of the Republican Party. It was a widely disparate coalition – old-line Whigs, bolting Democrats, Free-Soilers, abolitionists, and a faction that rallied behind the name of Know Nothings. The Know Nothing Party was formed in the 1850s, in response to an unprecedented flood of immigrants. Mostly from Ireland and Germany, and largely Roman Catholic.

Lincoln disdained the discriminatory beliefs of the Know Nothings. He wrote a friend, "Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that '*all men are created equal.*' We now practically read it '*all men are created equal, except negroes.*' When

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the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes, *and foreigners, and catholics.*’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance.”

It was in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1854 that a gathering of antislavery men proposed the name “Republican Party.” In early 1856 Lincoln decided that Illinois should follow New York and Ohio in organizing the various opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act into the new Republican Party. In short, the Kansas-Nebraska Act granted these new territories the right to determine for themselves whether to be free or slave states. Making the Missouri Compromise null and void, since both Kansas and Nebraska lay north of the 36 deg 30 min latitude line.

Lincoln’s political genius brought together all shades of antislavery opinion, where every faction was willing to concede something to create a party that all could support. In truth, the cornerstone of the Republican Party was not the abolition of slavery, but rather the prohibition of the extension of slavery.

It was not long before the Supreme Court fell on this cornerstone. In the Dred Scott ruling, the 7-2 decision held blacks “are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution. Nor did the Declaration of Independence apply to blacks. They were “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Adding that Congress had exceeded its authority when it forbade slavery in

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the territories by such legislation as the Missouri Compromise. Because slavers were private property, protected by the Constitution.

The anti-slavery cornerstone did come to crush those it fell upon. And this is celebrated as much in the South today as in the North. Much like the crushing of the Nazi Party is embraced throughout Germany. The judgment of God's cornerstone is like this. It is justice, and mercy, and healing. For those who sought sanctuary, and for those who fell upon the cornerstone and were broken. Only the evil is crushed and obliterated.

So we are left with a few questions. What is our active, aggressive cornerstone up to today? Surely injustice hasn't ceased; none of us are that naïve. How willing are we really, to be passively built as living stones into a spiritual house? Deferring to Jesus, rather than ourselves. Are we only comfortable being sanctuary, rather than stumbling block? How often do we feel the force of people running into us, at full speed?

If never, who, or what, is our cornerstone?