

When I saw Diana Butler Bass speak last fall, I remember a story she told. On a beautiful day, a pastor decided to hold Sunday service outside. As the congregation gathered in front of the church, she began the service like normal with a welcome and greeting time. The pastor said, “Good morning. Now that we’ve gathered, let us begin by greeting the church.” Everyone turned around and waved at the church building.

Although church buildings are a nice place to gather and the architecture and stained-glass windows make it feel like a sanctuary, God’s church is not the building. We see that now more than ever since we can’t meet in the physical building. Yet, during this time of separation, we are still the church. We are the bricks and mortar called to be the church, to love and share God’s love, wherever we are.

In this scripture, Peter uses the imagery of stones, “living stones,” that build a temple to house God’s presence. That makes sense because the temple was everything in Jewish culture. They believed the actual presence of God dwelled in the temple, so they went there every day to pray, worship, and offer sacrifices in order to dwell in God’s presence. Peter teaches that God is no longer limited to the physical temple building. God is building a temple within us, so that we can house God’s presence. We don’t have to go “to church” to dwell in God’s presence. We can dwell in the divine wherever we are and take God’s presence with us wherever we go.

Peter begins to build the temple imagery with Christ as the first stone, the cornerstone. The most important stone to build upon. Christ is the “living stone” because Christ continues to build churches,

sacred spaces where God dwells. New, physical churches pop up all the time.

Peter also says we are living stones too. God is building up something within us and creating something new in our midst. Our true self has been born and keeps growing into whom God has called us to be. Christ has made us come alive to our purpose. As living stones, Peter instructs: “Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house” (v.5). Peter isn’t saying “Build a spiritual house” for God. We’re not the builder. If we were to build a spiritual house, we might think about fundraising, leasing a new building, or renovating the worship space. We always focus on the practical, the bricks and mortar. Building the temple is not something we do. It’s something that God is doing within us.

The building process in ancient times was a very arduous task. The builders sorted through rocks, tossing aside the ones that looked too weak or misshapen, until they found the perfect cornerstone – and the right shape of rocks that fit around it. Peter says the religious authorities did this very thing to Jesus. Tossing him aside, they didn’t see his value and rejected him. They kept searching for what they thought the perfect cornerstone should be. Yet, God chose Jesus as the most precious stone.

Our building process today has advanced to where we can order the right size cornerstone and it is cut to our specifications. It is even delivered to our building site for us. This often makes us think that we are the builders, and we do all the work by ourselves. Or, perhaps we desire to be the cornerstone where others rely upon us and our direction. This is our challenge because God is the builder, and Christ is the cornerstone. If we leave out

those two, we are just a building. We must allow God to shape us and put us in the exact place where God needs us. The place that we connect best with the cornerstone and other living stones to make a strong house for God's presence.

Once we allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house where God dwells, we then offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God: Daily prayer, faithful worship, and heart-felt service. Loving God and neighbor in real, practical ways. Our spiritual sacrifices don't have to be some grand gesture. When we strive to fulfill some big life mission, we fail to see the sacred unfolding in our lives in simple, quiet, humble acts of service, love, and kindness."¹ These simple acts of worship are acceptable to God because they invite more people into God's presence.

What is God building in you? Where is God placing you as a living stone to build something new? As you reflect on those questions, take a stone and hold it in the palm of your hand. Feel it. Is it smooth or rough? Does God need to continue smoothing out the rough edges? Is God continuing to shape it? Is it heavy or light? Where does it fit with the cornerstone?

You are this living stone, chosen by God, to be a spiritual house where God dwells. I invite you to write "living stone" on this rock as a reminder that you are Christ's living stone. When you struggle with God's purpose for your life or when it's a challenge to allow God to build something within you, hold the stone while you offer your spiritual sacrifices of prayer and worship.

Continue to hold your stone, as I close in prayer:

Rock of Salvation, You are indeed our rock and our fortress. For your name's sake lead us and guide us. Take us out of the net that is hidden for us, for you are our refuge and strength. Into your hand we commit our spirit; you have redeemed us, O Lord, faithful God. As we hold this rock, we know that you hold us in the palm of your hand. We are your living stone, in which we offer ourselves to be built into a spiritual house. Help us to allow ourselves to be built by you, to allow you to place us exactly where we need to be, close to Christ, our cornerstone. We offer to you daily our spiritual sacrifices as we seek to dwell in your presence all the days of our lives. Reveal to us what you are building within us. Show us how you will use us as your living stones. Give us the wisdom to work side-by-side and connect with others, as you raise the walls to a new church, where everyone dwells in your presence. Amen.

¹ Elsy Arevalo, *Disciplines* 2020, 163.