

# THE STONE THE BUILDERS REJECTED

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*PSALM 118:1-2; 19-29; MARK 11:1-11*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

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*MARCH 29, 2015/PALM/PASSION SUNDAY*

On Thursday morning around 11 am, I settled into one of my least favourite chairs.

The dentist's chair.

I've had a fair amount of work done in my mouth over the years. I broke my jaw while playing hockey when I was younger and had to have it wired shut. I had a few teeth knocked out playing baseball and had to have surgical implants. And, of course, I've had a handful of routine fillings over the years, too. On Thursday, I was adding two more to the list.

I've also had at least two experiences where my mouth wasn't frozen properly when the drilling began. So, I tend to tense up a bit when I see the shiny instruments begin to make their way toward my mouth.

On Thursday, as I was sitting there in the chair, rehearsing all of these unpleasant details in my mind, the dental assistant came in and began to get things ready.

"OK," she said, "we're going to get started now. I want you to take a few deep breaths before we begin to freeze you up."

So, I did as I was instructed.

Deep breaths.

Deep breaths before the needles and drills and the suction hoses.

Deep breaths... The calm before the storm.

Well, as these ridiculously melodramatic thoughts about a routine visit to the dentist were bouncing around my brain, and as the drills were angrily buzzing around my mouth, I thought of the end of our text from Mark today.

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. He has been welcomed by adoring crowds. The palm branches have waved; the coats have been laid at his feet. Loud “Hosanna’s” have been shouted.

There is anticipation and excitement in the air. The people can sense what is coming. They sense that their king has arrived, that their liberation from Rome draws near!

The day comes and goes. Night has fallen; the people have dispersed, heading back to their homes, resting up before the renewal of festivities tomorrow.

And Jesus goes for a walk, all by himself.

Mark 11:11:

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

I wonder what Jesus thought, as he looked around.

We know what he thought about the temple, as his actions in a few verses will make clear. We’ve focused on Jesus prophetic judgment of the temple in two sermons over the past month or so.

But more generally, I wonder about Jesus’ state of mind, here, as he arrives at the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, the city about which he spoke these words much earlier in the story, in Luke 13:

**34** “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. **35** Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord...” Jesus has heard those very words as he approached the gates.

But he also knows what this city does to prophets, and he knows what it will do to him in a few short days.

And he walks around in the cool of night, looking around, taking it all in.

**The calm before the storm. The deep breath before the action begins.**

The pregnant pause before the events we know remember each year during this, the holiest week of the Christian year.

As he looks around, is he frightened? Does he foresee the pain that is coming—not just the physical pain of the beatings and the crucifixion, but the pain of what will happen when the people find out that the king they want is not the king that they will get.

**We know that Jesus is marching toward his own rejection, don't we?**

And Jesus knows this, too. He has predicted it three times, in Mark's gospel (Mark 8:31-33 is the most well-known one, we looked at it a few weeks ago).

This is surely one of the deepest tragedies in the history of the cosmos: When God comes to his people—when he comes to expose our sin, to heal our wounds, to teach and liberate us from ourselves and our death-dealing ways, to drag us along to new life—**when God shows up, the human response is to reject him.**

When God comes to his people, his people respond by murdering God.

The story is so familiar to us that this truth can lose its power to shock and unsettle us. But it should.

We are accustomed to reading the dark parts of this story through the lens of the outcome of Easter Sunday. And on one level, this is appropriate.

Easter Sunday *should* overwhelm the sadness of Good Friday and the ironies of Palm Sunday.

But in my experience when we focus exclusively on Jesus' last days through the lens of their outcome, we can miss the utter tragedy of God's image bearers crushing and snuffing out the very one that was sent to save and reclaim them.

**We can miss the awful truth that rejection is part of God's story.**

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Our second text for this morning, Psalm 118, also talks about rejection.

Psalm 118 is an "entrance liturgy." The people of Israel would sing this song as they made their way to the City of God for the celebration of Passover as a celebration of God's love and God's salvation.

Verse 22 talks about the "stone the builders rejected."

We don't know what the Psalmist specifically had in mind in this verse. Was he thinking about a physical structure, such as the temple? Is he using this language metaphorically to talk about how God has moved his people "from a place of rejection to restoration?"<sup>1</sup>

We don't know.

**What we *do* know is that the writers of the New Testament unequivocally interpret this verse through the lens of the rejected and risen Saviour of the world, Jesus of Nazareth.**

We see this in many places, but perhaps the most famous example of this is Peter's sermon to the religious elites of Israel after they question him for healing a lame man in Jerusalem in Acts 4:

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, **whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead**, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1251](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1251)

“the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the cornerstone’ (Acts 4:8-11)

Peter does not shy away from the awful truth that human beings are guilty for their rejection of God.

But he is equally clear that this rejection is the path to new life. *God raised him from the dead*, and because of this, healing and hope are possible.

We see this again in 1 Peter 2:4-7:

**4** As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— **5** you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. **6** For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”

**7** Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone.”

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So, here we are, Palm Sunday, 2015... The deep breath before the action begins... The calm before the storm.

And on this Palm Sunday 2015, I imagine Jesus not on the outskirts of first century Jerusalem, but of his twenty-first century church. I imagine him wandering around the walls, taking it all in...

What does he see, as he looks around?

Does he see a people eager to wave their branches and shout their hosannas, welcoming the entrance of a king, but only on their terms?

Does he see a people eager to honour him with their lips but whose hearts are far from him (Matthew 15:8-9)?

What has the world made of this stone that the builders rejected? What have his people done with it? Has it been a stumbling block or the precious cornerstone?

The question is, as always, a personal one.

Holy Week invites us, as followers of Jesus, to dwell with him, to wait with him in the dark parts of the story, as well as the glorious hope of Resurrection Sunday next week.

We will do this on Thursday night when we have our Maundy Thursday service, where we will celebrate the Lord's Supper and which will include a version of the Stations of the Cross.

But Holy Week is also an invitation to check the foundations of our own lives.

Is this rejected stone the one that we have embraced and placed our trust in?

Is the life that he taught and modeled becoming more at home in us?

Does confidence in his death and resurrection and future return define our hope?

**Are we convinced that this stone that the builders rejected is the means through which God is reconciling all things to himself?**

The Jerusalem crowds, the religious leaders of Israel, the Romans... These all rejected Jesus as king. Why?

Because nobody wants a suffering king. Nobody sees death as a victory. Nobody sees crucifixion as a coronation.

Nobody sees weakness as a form of strength or foolishness as a demonstration of God's deep wisdom.

Unless...

**Unless the stone that the builders rejected has become *their* cornerstone.**

For those who have made this stone their cornerstone begin to see things like “power” and “authority” and “strength” in a different way, through the lens of Jesus.

**They begin to see rejection and suffering and even *death* itself, not as signs of failure but as the cost of love in the world. Just like Jesus.**

It was love, after all, that led Jesus to the city of Jerusalem, to the cross. Love for the image-bearers of God. Love for a creation groaning under the weight of sin. Love for his friends and his enemies.

So, will we accept or reject this king and his scandalous love? Will this stone be a stumbling block for us, or the cornerstone of our lives?

I want to close with a poem from Malcolm Guite that speaks of the choice that each one of us must make. What will we do with this stone?

The poem is called “Palm Sunday.”

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,

The seething holy city of my heart,

The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?

Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;

They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,

And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find

The challenge, the reversal he is bringing

Changes their tune. I know what lies behind

The surface flourish that so quickly fades;

Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,

The hardness of the heart, its barricades,

And at the core, the dreadful emptiness

Of a perverted temple. Jesus come

Break my resistance and make me your home<sup>2</sup>

Amen.



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<sup>2</sup> [https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/03/28/a-sonnet-for-palm-sunday-3/?fb\\_action\\_ids=10155316534130361&fb\\_action\\_types=news.publishes&fb\\_ref=pub-standard](https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/03/28/a-sonnet-for-palm-sunday-3/?fb_action_ids=10155316534130361&fb_action_types=news.publishes&fb_ref=pub-standard)