



## Living Stones

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### Gathering

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **white** cloth or scarf to signify that this is a special time of celebration. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

*Today, you might want to find a stone to hold - maybe from the garden or a pebble from a pot plant.*



### Gathering

Today I want to talk about stones:  
stones we throw  
stones we gather to build a wall or a home  
stepping stones  
stones we stumble on  
stones that block our way  
living stones...

### Light Candle

We light this candle, inviting us into its light.  
And we allow ourselves to be drawn to its flame.  
And as we do, we look to Jesus, the light of the world,  
a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Christ is risen

***Christ is risen indeed!***

### Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples. From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

From river to ocean, from campfire to hearth

***may the First Nations who have cared for this land be blessed.***

From breath to song,

from step to dance

***may those who follow your Songlines guide us on the journey to living honourably in this place.***

From greeting to Amen,

from silence to chorus

***may our worship join with the voices of the First Nations of this Land.***

*(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here*

## Call to Worship

Like the multi-hued pebbles gathered onto a beach,

***we come from many places.***

Like river stones, smooth from life's surges or chipped in the world's torrents,

***so we come worn and wounded.***

Like precious stones, chosen, crafted and valued,

***so we come, cared about and loved by God.***

Like the stones of a building,

***so God brings us together.***

Come, as living stones, into God's presence!

***We come to worship God.***

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 5, 7 May 2023, p.150*

## Prayer

Creator, you have shaped a place for us made of love and held in grace.

It is filled with the whispers of the ancients who followed you and sculpted our faith.

Breathe into this place again,

that we may know your way, your truth, and your life. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 5, 7 May 2023, p.150*

## Sing - Teach Me To Dance (The Source 469)

*We being with a song of praise and invitation, that God will teach us, teach us to dance, to move, to walk in time with the movement of God's spirit.*

Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,

teach me to move in the pow'r of your Spirit,

teach me to walk in the light of your presence,

teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.

Teach me to love with your heart of compassion,

teach me to trust in the word of your promise,

teach me to hope in the day of your coming,

teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.

You wrote the rhythm of life, created heaven and earth,

in you is joy without measure.

So, like a child in your sight, I dance to see your delight,

for I was made for your pleasure, pleasure.  
*Teach me to dance...*

Let all my movements express a heart that loves to say 'yes',

a will that leaps to obey you.

Let all my energy blaze to see the joy in your face;

let my whole being praise you, praise you.  
*Teach me to dance...*

*Words and music: Graham Kendrick and Steve Thompson  
© 1993 Make Way Music*

## Prayer

Cosmic composer,

teach us to dance to your tune.

We praise you for the rhythm of life you call us into.

We praise you for the beauty of our surroundings,  
for the abundance we enjoy.

Open our eyes and ears now as we open ourselves to your Spirit.

Teach us to dance, to move, to walk, to love, to trust, to hope.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

**Reading:** 1 Peter 2:2-10

<sup>2</sup>Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— <sup>3</sup>if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.'

<sup>7</sup>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',

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup> 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 marvellous light.

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

**Confession**

*Invite everyone to hold their stone in open hands, to feel its hardness and weight.*

Incline your ear to us, O God, for we have so much to say.

There is so much that causes us to stumble and fall.

So much alters our path and causes us to question your goodness.

So much hurt and pain.

So much to lament.

We are listening for you, O God,  
longing to hear your still small voice

in pebbles and stones,

rocks and boulders,

and even in the living stones, you imagine each of us to be.

Our ears are open to you, O God.

*Silence.*

## **Sing** - Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones

*This song holds both the beauty and challenges of life together and invites us to think about whether we use stones to create stumbling blocks or stepping stones...*

Unsure, when what was bright turns dark  
And life, it seems, has lost its way,  
We question what we once believed  
And fear that doubt has come to stay.  
We sense the worm that gnaws within  
Has withered willpower, weakened bones,  
And wonder whether all that's left  
Is stumbling blocks or stepping stones?

Where minds and bodies reel with pain  
Which nervous smiles can never mask,  
And hope is forced to face despair  
And all the things it dared not ask;  
Aware of weakness, guilt or shame,  
The will gives out, the spirit groans,  
And clutching at each straw we find  
More stumbling blocks than stepping stones.

Where family life has lost its bliss  
And silences endorse mistrust,  
Or anger boils and tempers flare  
As love comes under threat from lust;  
Where people cannot take the strain

Of worklessness and endless loans,  
What pattern will the future weave –  
Just stumbling blocks, no stepping stones?

Where hearts that once held love are bare  
And faith, in shreds, compounds the mess;  
Where hymns and prayers no longer  
speak  
And former friends no longer bless;  
And where the church where some  
belonged  
No more their loyalty enthrones,  
The plea is made, "If you are there,  
Turn stumbling blocks to stepping stones!"

Ah God, You, with the Maker's eye,  
Can tell if all that's feared is real,  
And see if life is more than what  
We suffer, dread, despise and feel.  
If some by faith no longer stand  
Nor hear the truth your voice intones,  
Stretch out your hand to help your folk  
From stumbling blocks to stepping stones.

*Words and Arrangement (c) 1989 The Iona Community*

### **Words of Assurance**

Worn and scattered or hard or broken, we are precious.  
We have received mercy and are God's people.

**Alleluia!**

**We are God's people and we proclaim God's goodness. Amen.**

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 5, 7 May 2023, p.151*

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## **Listening for God's Voice**

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### **Reading: Acts 7:55-60**

<sup>54</sup> When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.

<sup>55</sup> But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' <sup>57</sup> But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup> Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' <sup>60</sup> Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God!**

## Reflection

Open us, loving God.

When we want to close our hearts, minds, and even our ears from the cries of others,  
from pleas for help and proclamations of justice, open us.

Remove every stumbling block, and enliven us with your spirit.

Open us, we pray. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 5, 7 May 2023, p.148*

What kind of stone are you?

An odd question, perhaps...

But...

The reading from Acts 7 puts stones in the hands of the religious leaders who use them to kill Stephen. Stephen is one of 7 men chosen by the early community of Christ to ensure that everyone was cared for and had equal access to food that was distributed amongst Jesus' followers. He is described in Acts 6 as a "man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and someone who was "full of grace and power, did wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). But some people took a dislike to him, didn't like that he was wise and so made up stories about him and stirred up a crowd against him (6:10-13). What we have in the reading this week, is the end of a long speech given by Stephen to the high priest where he gives an account of the history of the Hebrew people and their rejection of the Holy Spirit. He did call them "stiff-necked" and "un-circumcised in heart and ears" (7:51) which was pretty offensive to the Hebrew leaders and so understandably didn't go down so well and got the leaders more than a bit angry - the story tells us that they "ground their teeth at Stephen" (7:54) and then they dragged him out of the city and stoned him. Stones - they hurt, they kill.

The gospel reading for this week, we didn't read it in its entirety - those of you who attended Betty Chittick's funeral on Tuesday would have heard it - from John 14, it is the words of Jesus to his disciples the night before he died, which include these well-known and often mis-used words:

<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:5-7)

I want to suggest that these words of Jesus have been used like stones - thrown at people of other faiths or no faith, claiming that Jesus is the *only* way to encounter God's grace - a position I simply cannot accept - for three reasons.

First, Jesus speaks these words specifically to his disciples who are all faithful Jews. He is speaking to their understanding of God's revelation, God's promise of a Messiah.

Second, the writer of John, writing somewhere after 70CE, puts these words in Jesus' mouth at a time when the early Christian community is struggling. They have been rejected by the Jewish leaders and the Roman Empire doesn't like them very much either. They are intended, in this context, to encourage them to remain focussed on the life and teaching of Jesus.

And third, there is much about *what* he says here... John's gospel, has Jesus saying "I am" in a number of different ways - last week, we heard him saying "I am the gate" and "I am the good shepherd" (John 10), he also says: I am the bread of life (John 5) and I am the resurrection and the life (John 11). "I am" is a way of Jesus saying that he embodies what he is describing, he embodies the way, he embodies the truth, he embodies the life - in looking to him we begin to understand how God's way, truth and life are embodied in the world.

That is not an exclusive claim, necessarily. And certainly ought not to be used to separate us or divide us from our brothers and sisters who seek truth and light and life in the world today.

Then the reading we heard from 1 Peter 2, issues this invitation:

<sup>4</sup> Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup>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.

Stones - living stones - perhaps a kind of odd image for something that is usually through to be inanimate. But, the explanation is helpful - stones that are built into dwelling places of God's spirit - not walls to separate and divide, but spaces for God's spirit to be encountered.

How might we be living stones?

How might we be built into spaces that enable people to encounter God's grace?

What kind of stone are you holding right now?

Is it a stone you want to throw at someone - please don't!

Can it be, instead, a stone, that invites you to be creative, to be what in some circles is called an animator, someone who actively works to create the space for others to encounter grace, hope, love - the way, the truth, the life of Jesus.

What does it look like for us to be creators, curators, of spaces where people can be safe as they explore questions of life and faith.

Life can be harsh - we all know what it is like to be on the receiving end of someone throwing stones. Some of us carry the wounds and scars that those stones have left.

Can we, then, offer healing and grace to one another?

And so, offer healing and grace to the world we seek to serve.

Let us pray,

God we hold in our hands a stone,  
a symbol of all the harsh words we have used;  
and the revenge we have sought;

the anger we have felt when our ego or pride have been dented.

Perhaps too it reminds us of the wounds we carry when we have felt the stones hurled by others.

But we pray now, that in your transforming love, we will come to embody the grace and love that your Son, Jesus, showed,

that this stone will remind us that you invite us to become living stones,  
ready to proclaim your love, to shine your light in the world today. Amen.

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## Responding

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### **Sing** - Christ Be Our Light (ATOK 313)

*This song is a prayer - that Christ's light will guide us as we seek to be all God has created us to be...*

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.  
Longing for truth, we turn to you.  
Make us your own, your holy people,  
light for the world to see.

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.  
Shine through the darkness.  
Christ, be our light!  
Shine in your church gathered today.*

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.  
Longing for hope, many despair.  
Your word alone has power to save us.  
Make us your living voice.  
*Christ, be our light!...*

Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.  
Make us your bread, broken for others,  
shared until all are fed.  
*Christ, be our light!...*

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.  
Longing for warmth, many are cold.  
Make us your building, sheltering others  
walls made of living stone.  
*Christ, be our light!...*

Many the gifts, many the people,  
many the hearts that yearn to belong.  
Let us be servants to one another,  
making your kingdom come.  
*Christ, be our light!...*

*Words and Music: © 1993 Bernadette Farrell*

### **Prayer for Others**

God, we come before you in a spirit of prayer,  
knowing that our world is hurting.  
We know you have great compassion for all your people, and that we are dear to you.  
We know you have created a safe place, a refuge,  
for those who need it.  
Guide them to it, we pray.

There is a place for those who mourn and for those who hurt,  
a place of comfort and a place of healing:  
for those we have lost to illness,  
and those we have never known.  
In silence, we pray...  
Hear us.

There is a place for those who hunger and thirst,  
a place of banquets and grace:  
for farmers trapped in unfair trade,  
families dispossessed.  
In silence, we pray...  
Hear us.

There is a place for those imprisoned for belief and justice,  
a place of freedom and full lives:  
for mothers of the disappeared,  
fathers exiled.  
In silence, we pray...

Hear us.

There is a place for those oppressed and downtrodden,  
a place of liberation and justice:  
for children of sectarianism,  
families divided.

In silence, we pray...

Hear us.

Hear all our prayers, loving God,  
and answer according to your will and purpose.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 5, 7 May 2023, p.152*

### **Offering**

*As we have received, so we consider our response...*

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our response.*

*As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we have encountered the living Christ.*

O God,

we bring our money, a small part of our riches, for the benefit of this whole community,  
we bring our time, our gifts, and our commitment to the task of growing together as a  
community of faith, disciples of Jesus, seeking to embody your way in our lives.

Bless our efforts, we pray, Amen.

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### **Sending**

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**Sing** - Faith Has Set Us On A Journey (tune: Ode To Joy (TIS 698))

*This song reminds us that our understanding of God is never complete, our expression of faith is never finished - our growth is complex but we commit to the journey together.*

Faith has set us on a journey  
past the landmarks that we know,  
taking risks with no insurance  
but the Word that tells us "Go!"  
Friend or job or home or lover  
we may need to leave behind,  
outworn truths and ways of  
thinking,  
baggage to the past consigned.

Some are swags of easy  
conscience  
who with others hitch a ride,  
some are tourist-package  
Christians,  
dollar-safe, with Book and guide.

There are others on this journey -  
those who long and pray and  
search,  
heave the stones to free the  
structures,  
love the Christ and leave the  
Church.

We are this unlikely people  
in the Body knit as one,  
company of clowns and cripples -  
some are wise and some can run.  
Prophets are our travel agents,  
gospel-makers lay this road:  
to the place of peace and promise  
faith will take us into God.

*Shirley Murray*



**Sending**

Go, as Easter people, living stones,  
called and chosen,  
forgiven and formed into a new community,  
working together to show God's mercy and truth.

***We go to live in God's way in the name of Christ and the power of the Spirit.  
Amen.***

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 4, 30 April 2023, p.152*

**Blessing**

And may the God of all creation, bless you.  
May the Living Christ, bless you.  
And may the breath of the Spirit, bless you.  
Today and always. Amen.

Liturgy adapted from material from:  
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Rev Kath Merrifield  
7 May 2023