

# Shepherd's Cornerstone

April 21, 2024

Acts 4:5-12

1 John 3:16-24

I'm afraid that "Shepherd's Cornerstone" is a phrase that doesn't make a lot of sense. Cornerstones are architectural features of buildings, buildings with foundations. Shepherds in the first century didn't live in buildings with foundations, at least not very often.

Yet the two ideas come together, at least in my mind, in this passage from Acts. Ancient Israel routinely used "shepherd" as a metaphor for the responsibilities of civil and religious leadership. Look through the psalms and you'll find, over and over again, "shepherd" used to explain the role of a monarch. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which we prayed through adapted words this morning, the writer described God's sovereignty in the world as being like a shepherd.

In Acts 4, the senior shepherds of the Jerusalem Temple gathered together. Rulers, elders, scribes, and notably Luke named members of the high-priestly family: Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander. They had gathered to consider the fate of Simon Peter and John the son of Zebedee.

Simon Peter introduced the other word in my odd phrase: "cornerstone." It wasn't original to him. Jesus spoke about the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone while arguing with the scribes and the chief priests in the Temple during the last few days before his arrest and crucifixion. It got them angry, because he'd clearly accused them of hindering God's plans. I have no doubt that some of them were in the room again to hear Simon Peter repeat it. I don't think it made them any happier to hear it a second time.

Matt Skinner writes at Working Preacher, "These are not rank-and-file Jews who oppose, detain, and question Peter and John. They are the leaders of the temple and the Jewish nobles whom Rome entrusted with ruling and ensuring the peace in Judea. With the high priest atop the pyramid, they are the tiny percentage of the Judean population that possessed an enormous amount of power."

Let me step back just a moment to explain why Peter and John were in this predicament. It had been at least two months, possibly more, since Jesus' death and resurrection. The day of Pentecost had come along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that had led Simon Peter to speak in public for the first time. After that, however, the group of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem stayed relatively quiet. They worshiped in the Temple. They shared meals with one another. They welcome new people into the church. Nobody in authority seemed to notice.

Then Peter and John went to the Temple to worship, and met a beggar who could not walk, being carried to a place where he could beg for his sustenance. Simon Peter told him, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he did, praising God. People asked Peter to explain it, and he spoke of Jesus' resurrection and his power to heal.

That's what got them arrested.

I guess it was okay that they did a good thing for somebody, but they did it in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong theology. Do better next time.

D. Mark Davis writes in his blog, *LeftBehindAndLovingIt*, "This whole inquiry is rooted in the assumption that the ruling judges are looking down at powerless idiots. The irony is that the powerless idiots have something that the ruling judges don't: The name of Jesus, whom these judges had rejected, but who has now returned with power. And the undeniable evidence against the judges is simply a man, who was once lame and is now walking."

In other words, the leadership here has reverted to that most basic of assertions of power: "Because I said so."

Mitzi J. Smith writes at *Working Preacher*, "Religious folks who have confused the power of position with the power of God are more likely to reject the power of God operating in others who lack similar position and rank (cf. 4:13), despite how God might use them. We should maintain some humility considering our fallibility, mortality or human condition no matter how high we might climb in institutions. Only God is infallible, inscrutable, and absolutely God."

The cornerstone of our faith is one that's often been rejected because it doesn't look like it will hold the weight. We proclaim as Savior one who wouldn't save himself. We proclaim as Judge one who endured unjust judgement. We proclaim as all-Powerful one who would not claim that power. Would you build a building on that? Would you build a program on that? Would you build a faith on that?

God would.

That's the sticky part. God would. And has. And does.

Our cornerstone is a shepherd's cornerstone, one based upon the role of caring, nurturing, and protecting. Caring, nurturing, and protecting not just human beings, but sheep, who are pretty annoying creatures who don't have the sense that God gave a... well, something less sensible than a sheep.

While I grant you that human beings are much cleverer than sheep, our talent for getting ourselves into nonsensical situations outdoes anything any sheep has ever done. How do arguments escalate to fights? By the participants adding more energy to the argument as it

goes back and forth. By the participants refusing to be the one who will back away. By the participants always being the one who is “right,” rather than the one who is loving.

You’d think that in larger groups we’d do better, but we don’t. So many wars start with provocations going back and forth until provocation has become full scale conflict. National pride is no more rational than individual pride. Given the number of people it kills, I’d have to call it less rational and more evil.

When you know where the provocations lead, why do them? Why?

Why do them when the Good Shepherd told us to love one another?

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” wrote a later apostle, one we know as John but almost certainly not John the son of Zebedee who stood accused with Simon Peter that day. Nevertheless, they did precisely what that writer advised decades later when they extended love, offering healing in Jesus’ name to one who rejoiced in it. They extended love when they spoke to the people prepared to judge and condemn them that God had taken something rejected and made it important. They extended love when they simply said, a few sentences later, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Our cornerstone, frequently rejected, is the Shepherd’s cornerstone, the cornerstone of love, compassion, generosity, and courage. Our cornerstone, frequently rejected, looks weak to the world but strong to God. Our cornerstone, frequently rejected, is the Shepherd’s cornerstone, upon which we can build a beloved community.

Our cornerstone, frequently rejected, is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the cornerstone, the Christ of God, the one who loved and commands us to love.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*