

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander

Easter 5 (A) ~ 7 May 2023

St. Dunstan's, Bethesda

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:1-10

John 14:1-14

“From Generation to Generation”

If you approach St. Dunstan's from Massachusetts Avenue, you may have noticed the cornerstone facing Fort Sumner Drive that reads “1958,” the year in which construction on this building was begun. That's when the foundation of the physical structure was laid, and it is, of course, a noteworthy date...so much so that it is literally inscribed in rock, lest anyone forget. But even more importantly, the Church itself – the *ekklesia*, which is to say, the People of God called out to *be* St. Dunstan's – also was founded in 1958. Do you hear the difference? On the one hand, there is the building; on the other, the Church.

To be blunt: The Church is not the building. Bricks and mortar and glass and shingles simply provide a container in which the Body of Christ lives out its mission. These walls *house* the Church, but they are *not* the Church. That's a crucial distinction.

So yes, the cornerstone of 5450 Massachusetts Avenue was put in place in 1958, *and* St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church started gathering for worship and mission at about that same time. As you may know, St. Dunstan's was planted on this corner under the leadership of the Rev. John Parker Coleman, then-Rector of our sister parish, the Church of the Redeemer just five or so minutes from here. There was a desire to extend the reach of Redeemer's ministry beyond the boundaries of what was then the sleepy little town of Glen Echo to the more promising, up-and-coming Sumner neighborhood. This location – just up from the District line, on a major DC thoroughfare – was thought to be ideal.

And so it is that this year, 2023, St. Dunstan's celebrates the 65th anniversary of our founding – marking more than half a century of Christian witness here in this place. (Some have speculated that that this means that the parish is ready for retirement...To which I quickly respond, “By no means!”)

Nevertheless, 65 is, indeed, a significant milestone.

When we speak of a 65-year-old person, we often say that she or he is “mature,” “of a certain age,” or “seasoned.” Perhaps we ascribe some degree of wisdom, or experience, or

gravitas, to them. One hopes they are accorded a measure of respect – although we also know that this is not always the case. (Insert shameless plug here for The PathAhead, beginning today after worship...)

But what does it mean when a *congregation* turns 65? In this part of the country, of course, that's not very old at all – certainly not when compared to some parishes in Maryland that date back to the 17th century. And those are young, too, by Church of England standards: I was reminded yesterday when watching the King's Coronation that Westminster Abbey was the new Church in town back when William the Conqueror was crowned in 1066!

Seen in that light, St. Dunstan's is really just in our infancy; we're only getting started. And as we approach this momentous anniversary, this birthday, it's worth asking ourselves who we want to be when we "grow up."

Hold that thought.

In today's Epistle, the apostle Peter (or someone writing under the name of Peter) addresses provinces of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. If we picture the map in our heads, we'll see pretty quickly that those Churches are quite a distance from Galilee and Jerusalem, where Christianity began. But thanks to the travels and missionary activity of that other great apostle, Paul, the new faith has grown rapidly in this part of the world. Word about Jesus spreads like wildfire as more and more souls are grafted into the Body of Christ through Baptism.

For the new converts in these early Churches in Asia Minor, becoming a Christian means taking on something altogether new, altogether different from their roots. They are in the infancy of the faith. For these believers, becoming Christian requires a major sea change. For them, to be Christian is to be truly counter-cultural: Even members of their own family, their own household, might not share the faith. They face systematic persecution at the hands of Rome. It is *risky* to claim their allegiance to Christ.

So Peter writes to these early Christian communities to build them up, to give them confidence and courage and vision as they make their way, as they learn how to claim their identity as followers of Jesus. Peter exhorts them to hold strong and together create the groundwork for generations to come. He urges them to be "living stones," stones that may be built into an impenetrable spiritual house. They are not just a heap of rejected rocks thrown randomly and carelessly on a pile, but rather they are hand-selected, each of a different size and shape and color and texture, to be fit together in a strong foundation wall – with Jesus Himself as their cornerstone.

We might not think too much about it these days, in an era of CAD drawings and precise engineering technology, but in the ancient world the cornerstone of a building was far more than a decorative historic marker. It set the tone and shape for the whole construction. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains:

In the lexicon of biblical images of architecture, no image is more evocative than the cornerstone, the focal point of a building, the thing on which it most depends for structural integrity.¹

Picture that: Jesus as our focal point, the One on whom the Church – which is to say, the *ekklesia*, the People of God called out to *be* the Church – most depends for structural integrity.

What might it look like to build our lives as a community of faith and as individuals on the cornerstone of Christ?

To build our lives on the cornerstone of Christ is to allow our identities as followers of Jesus, as The Church, to give shape and meaning to everything we do. Everything.

I think that it's a safe bet that most of us, at least, have plenty of moments throughout the day when God is not foremost in our minds. I know I do. Most of us, at least, find ourselves tempted to take the easy way out from time-to-time – to cut corners, perhaps. Or we're tempted to tell a quick lie to cover for our own "things done and left undone." Or we succumb to the desire to tell that nasty receptionist at the doctor's office what we really think about her. Or we repay evil for evil.

If we are honest (which we're supposed to be in Church!), we all have those less-than-attractive moments of raw humanity. And the truth is, sometimes we are, in fact, going to give in to them; it's bound to happen. We do make mistakes; we do sin. But our humanity does not exempt us from a responsibility to make a difference in this world; to reach out in love and kindness and compassion to a stranger; to be instruments of grace in a world so desperate for Good News.

I'll share a story:

When I was a little girl of about four or five, my mother sent me out to "help" my father build a stonewall along our driveway. Now, my Dad was many wonderful things, but

¹ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 166.

patience was definitely not one of his virtues. So you can imagine his annoyance when this little kid kept bringing him these tiny pebbles – all I could carry – for the wall. Let's just say that there was a lot of sighing and eye-rolling involved. But: being a good father (and probably being a little afraid of my mother), he accepted what I had to offer. Now, whenever I go back to my childhood home, I look at that stone wall and think of a young man, in a hurry to get a dirty and tedious job done, who took the time to place each small stone just so, alongside its larger neighbors. I see those little pebbles still there in the mortar and am reminded of a father who found a place and a use for even the most insignificant contributions; they became part of the very structure itself, helping to hold up the layer that came after.

I think that's what Peter means when he talks about "living stones," built into a spiritual house on the cornerstone of Jesus. As each of us learns to live into our identity as His follower, allowing His loving, liberating and life-giving Gospel (to quote our Presiding Bishop) to make a difference in our lives, so we build up the Church – one tiny pebble at a time. We are, in fact, living, breathing *stones* – each of a different size and shape and color and texture, each with a place in a strong foundation wall, helping to hold up the layers that will come after.

As I mentioned earlier, today we celebrate "Seabury Sunday" at the outset of Older Americans Month, and we give thanks for the legacy of love and service embodied by so many living stones who build the Church by living their faith. Literally every time I visit her at Brighton Gardens, Janet Crampton – our oldest parishioner at 107 – tells me that she wishes she still could help with Altar Guild, which she did for years here. Janet also pledged to our Stewardship Campaign this year: If that's not an example of a living stone, I don't know what is! (

We at St. Dunstan's today are indebted to Janet and all the generations who came before us, like layers of rock and pebble and mortar in a stonewall, generations who hold us up now. Generations who contributed their pebbles through active ministry, through financial support, and through prayer.

We stand on the shoulders of generation after generation of giants, all on the cornerstone of Christ. I wonder who the living stones in your life are. Give thanks for them. If they are still living, give thanks *to* them.

As we celebrate our 65th anniversary, it's worth asking ourselves who will stand on *our* shoulders. Who do we want St. Dunstan's to be when we "grow up"? *Amen.*