



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2015

“Out of These Stones”

(Luke 3:7-8)

Rev. David K. Groth

“John said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Luke 3:7-8).

COLLECT: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

“Stone Soup” is a children’s book by Ann McGovern. In it, a hungry and apparently homeless boy asks an old woman to make dinner for him. “I have nothing to give you” she says. But the boy says, “If you will not give me something to eat, will you give me a stone, so that I can make soup? This arouses the woman’s curiosity. “Soup from a stone. Fancy that” she says, and soon the boy is in the house, a pot is boiling over the fire with a stone like this inside of it. After a few minutes, the little old lady mentions, “This soup is cooking fast.” The boy responds, “It’s cooking fast now but it would cook faster with some onions.” So she adds some onions, bewildered that you can make soup from a stone. A few minutes later the little old lady says, “This soup smells good.” “It smells good now,” says the young man. “It would smell better with some carrots.” And so it goes, until the soup also has beef bones, barley, pepper and salt. The old woman never really figured it out. She kept giving credit to the stone. But you know: so do you. So do I. Let me explain.

God’s Word consistently teaches that as far as faith is concerned, by nature, we have a lot in common with this stone. By nature, we are spiritually lifeless, like this stone. By nature, we are spiritually blind and deaf. By nature we are spiritually stone cold dead . . . like this stone.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” If God wants to build faith, there’s really no raw material for him to work with in this stone, or by nature here, within each of us. To make a Christian out of us the Holy Spirit doesn’t need anything that we have. In fact what we present the Spirit is more of a liability than an asset.

And yet sometimes we get it into our heads that there must have been something pretty special about us that prompted God to choose us and save us. With that in mind, let's consider the Gospel lesson.

John the Baptist wasn't fooling around here. He never did. One of his favorite ways of addressing his congregation was as a wriggling brood of snakes. This day he's saying the Day of the Lord is coming. Therefore you need to repent and bear fruit in keeping with repentance or you're going to find yourself in a whopping load of trouble. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time. And then he adds, "And don't begin to think we have Abraham as our father" and that will keep us safe.

You see, for centuries, the Jews had concluded that only those born into their nation and culture were saved by God. Israel was the chosen nation of God, for sure. However, faith had always been an essential part of this covenantal relationship. God's ancient people were saved the same way you and I are: by grace through faith . . . and not by works. Gradually, however, the grace and faith parts were pushed out, and it became widely assumed that simply being a part of the Jewish race was sufficient for salvation. If your mother was Jewish, you were Jewish and therefore a part of God's people. People began to think salvation was a birthright and faith had little to do with it.

"Not so," John tells his Jewish listeners, "For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Just about everywhere in the countryside of Israel, there are stones lying about. They're all over the place. They've been called Palestinian confetti. They are an annoyance to Israeli police, but also to farmers, gardeners, and people walking on paths and stubbing their toes, or kicking up the smallest ones into their shoes.

Isn't it interesting that John would have his listeners think about stones? Out of these annoying, lifeless, worthless stones, God can raise up children of faith. John was derisively dismissing spiritual blessings based on race.

We have to get that into our heads as well. Don't begin to think that the stone has anything to do with a fine pot of soup. Everything we are, by nature, is more a liability to our salvation than an asset. There's nothing we can point to and say, "Ah, this is why God chose me." You have no biblical text that would support your suspicion that God saw you were going to be humble, patient, winsome or generous, and such a great asset to the church and so that's why he saved you. If you are any of those things, it's only because God has made you those things through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

"We are the clay; he is the potter" Isaiah teaches. Does a lump of clay have anything to brag about? It's the potter who turns it into something beautiful and useful. Similarly, as far as the Bible is concerned, all of us ultimately come from dust. As far as I know, there's really nothing in the raw material of dust in which we can take pride. Dust you are and to dust you shall return. It's just dust, not worthy of any confidence or conceit.

"Out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." With the stone in mind, can Christians take excessive pride in the families from which they come, as if their genes had something to do with their success or their salvation? Can Christians take pride in their race, as if God favors one over another? Paul wrote, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian... but Christ is all, and is in all." John, in his own caustic way, was telling the Jews and us, "There's nothing you can point to. Before God, all of us come empty handed."

The Bible teaches this in many ways. John points to the stones. Jesus points to sheep who are lost, clueless, vulnerable. Sheep without the Good Shepherd are in a heap of trouble. Jesus also said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing."

Isaiah says it this way: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its masters crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Somebody has to teach them,

show them to whom they belong and why, or else they'll never know.

Paul says it this way: "You were dead in your transgressions and sin." Dead. Without life. Without hope. Like a stone. Not able to move even an inch toward God.

The Bible teaches this in so many ways. When Jesus was entering Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, the crowd that lined the way began praising him as the Son of God. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd told Jesus to rebuke his disciples, and Jesus responded, "If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." The ability to praise and worship God, like faith, is a gift, for worship flows out of faith. It would be no more difficult for the Lord to teach a stone to sing his praises than it is for him to teach us to sing his praises. And yet, some of us will go home today after worship with the warm feeling that we just did God a favor and he owes us one now.

The Bible teaches that faith is a gift, but sometimes we get it into our heads that faith is a choice, and we talk about when we decided for Christ, or when we found Jesus. This stone doesn't have enough life in it to make a choice. It doesn't have enough leg on it to go out and find Jesus. And Jesus wasn't hiding in the first place. He's the one who finds us. Ezekiel 34, "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out."

You and I know that a stone doesn't add anything to a pot of soup. God made us his children in spite of our nature, not because of our nature.

In Ezekiel, God promises to the people of Israel, "I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh... then they will be my people, and I will be their God." How does the Lord do that? Where does the Lord do that?

Normally in advent, we think of God's first coming in Bethlehem as a baby, or we think of his second coming, otherwise known as the Day of the Lord, Judgment Day. In between those two big advents, however, there are countless

smaller ones. And it's in those quiet advents, those Word and sacrament advents, where God does open heart surgery, removing hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh.

It happens in baptism, where God teaches a rock hard little heart to say, "Abba", father. "Miracle each time it happens" the hymn says, "Here we bring a child of nature; Home we take a newborn creature" (LSB 593).

Think about the clay and the potter again. With his Word, the Lord shapes us, molds us, changes us, inside, just like a potter does with his thumbs, and outside, just like a potter does with his hands. He makes us beautiful, and useful.... Those stories in the Bible, the parables, the lessons taught in Sunday School and VBS, they become part of us. They shape who we are and how we think about ourselves and the world and our place in the world.

God works us over in the Lord's Supper too. We don't change the body and blood of the Lord into our nature; He changes us, cleanses us, strengthens us. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" promised Jesus. It's as if a wolf ate a lamb, Luther said, but that meal proved so powerful that the wolf was turned into a lamb.

"Out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." That's both good and bad news. The bad news--stones are helpless, without life, without hope, not particularly loveable. The good news: God can do a lot with stones. In the little advents of Word and Sacrament, he can work with them, and make a spiritual house out of them, with Christ himself serving as the cornerstone and capstone. The good news is there really isn't much to love about a stone, but somehow God still finds a way to love us. The Good news is that God can and does turn those innumerable stones littering the landscape into His faithful people, as innumerable as the stars in the sky. God can do a lot with stones. So thanks be to God that he can even raise up children for himself from the stones! Amen.

