



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Proper 12 Year B June 20, 2021 Holy Spirit Whonnock

Readings: 1 Samuel 17: 32-49; Psalm 9: 9-20; 2 Cor 6: 1-13; Mark 4: 35-41

It is such a delight for me to be here at Holy Spirit, Whonnock. One day soon, God willing, we will move out of pandemic and into a new light. I am delighted at the work that the Rev'd Miranda is doing amongst you and with you. Her energy and enthusiasm for the gospel of God's love is infectious and encouraging. It is great to be here.

Back a few years ago now I was fortunate enough to go to the Island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. Iona is known as a holy island, a place of retreat and Christian connection. St. Columba founded an abbey there in the 6th century and essentially ever since this has been a place of transformation as people have discovered on this island an intersection of the calling of God and their own lives. It is experienced as a place set aside from the constant motion of life to be a place of peace and stillness. A place where the wind and waves of life seem to get settled and calmed.

While I was there, I had a chance to discover much of the island and on the shores of a couple of beaches I picked up several stones. One in particular continues to sit on my desk. I call it my prayer stone as it somehow keeps me grounded, connected and linked to God's presence. Somehow it reminds me of God's continuing calling to enter more fully into living God's hope and God's purpose.

I pick up that prayer stone often, for I have always enjoyed the feel of a well rounded stone in my hand. A stone that has had the roughness smoothed, the edges calmed, the bitterness eased, one weathered by storm and wind and rain, one that has held firm despite it all. Those weathered stones seem to represent a deep connection to this earth and to the guiding hand behind all that we see and know, experience and endure.

This image came to my mind because we heard in our reading from First Samuel the story of David and Goliath. Last week we heard of David being the unlikely candidate chosen as the next king. Today we hear of him facing down a giant of a person, Goliath the Philistine. David gives up on the sword and armour of a warrior and instead chooses the weapon of a shepherd, pulling out a slingshot. The Bible tells us that he went to the wadi and carefully chose five smooth stones. Five smooth stones about the right size and right consistency to sail through the air with accuracy and intent.

Now this is a passage that many of us might remember as children and it is filled with intrigue, adventure, battle and the underdog coming through. A great story revealing God's walk with God's people. The story is somewhat gruesome though if you read it with some care. It doesn't spare any details about the death of Goliath, does not steer around the horror of war or the violence of this death. But I want to dwell not so much on the viciousness of the story but rather those five stones. Casting aside the traditional weapons and gear of war, David gathered instead those things that he knew and trusted. He sought out five smooth stones that for him signalled his calling in life. They were what he knew, what he lived, part of where God's presence intersected with his life. His faith was not something he picked up when he had to, much like the uniform and standard equipment of a soldier; no the presence of The Shepherd was constant and clear in his life as he collected the five stones. It was more an act of faith than an act of violence.

Thinking about those five stones brought me back to my prayer stone sitting on my desk. Let them do something similar for you. Bring to mind the five smooth stones from the wadi. Picture them on the ground and pick them up and hold them in your hand for a moment. Hold them there for a while and see them as more than mere rocks but a symbol of something holy. Hold them there for a bit and I will come back to them.

Over the last while living in this pandemic, we have witnessed a few more cracks in our society that seem to be opening a little wider and some of those fissures have exposed our world in the ways we are lacking a depth of compassion and kindness. We are seeing a divisiveness on our planet that seems to ignore human dignity and gentleness and instead invites in power and personal gain. It is troubling, especially when it is revealed a little too clearly. While we have been trying to protect ourselves and others from the spread of the virus it has become painfully obvious that some countries have and some do not in terms of how to stop the spread of the virus and how to protect all people. Closer to home, anti-Asian racism seems to be on the increase and is somehow related to the pandemic. Anti-Muslim violence claimed the lives of most of a family in London, Ontario. The list is long of other social concerns that perhaps we have noticed a little more during this time of social isolation as we have wondered how we can

change the path that we have gone down in terms of climate emergency, homelessness, overdoses, violence against women, amongst others. Tomorrow is officially National Indigenous Peoples' Day, and in light of the discovery of the 215 unmarked graves in Kamloops, perhaps this year this day holds a deeper significance and purpose. We are being invited to dig much more deeply than passing interest into what it means to live into truth and true reconciliation.

From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission we can read: "Together, Canadians must do more than just talk about reconciliation; we must learn how to practise reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and workplaces. To do so constructively, Canadians must remain committed to the ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships."

The effects of the pandemic, at least locally are starting to trend downward. There is much to celebrate in this but it also might cause us to pause on the edge of this new threshold and consider what we have learned and where God is calling us forward now.

I asked you to think about five smooth stones in your hand, the five smooth stones of David but more than that your five smooth stones might just be the five things that guide you on this day as we sit on the edge of coming out of the pandemic. What are the five things, five stones that are inviting you into greater depth on the pilgrimage of following Christ? Let me suggest five stones to pick up and carry with you when you leave this place today.

We have gathered to worship God and a major part of that is to give thanks for God's gifts, God's presence, God's voice in our lives. This the first stone, the stone of thanksgiving to God for the gift of life; thanksgiving will change who you are.

That thanksgiving is not just for now but for always. Create a spiritual practice where by routine and possibility we claim a faith of our own each and every day. Our calling is not just to respond to the faith of our ancestors or our own faith of a number of years ago. No what is Christ calling you, you, to do on this day and each day in response to living out the resurrection and faith in the love of God? Commitment is the second stone.

The third stone is about compassion. Our faith is dead if it does not lead us to compassion for others. This often begins with a need to forgive ourselves for mistakes, wrongs, sins we have committed but also accepting God's forgiveness and passing that along to those in our lives that need to hear that message of mercy and a path forward. The stone of compassion.

The fourth stone is poignant in our country at the moment and that is justice. Where do we need to rethink how God is calling us to live out our lives with others? Where are the places that an acknowledgment of abuse is accepted and truth and reconciliation sought to move forward. Our faith is about looking toward a place of God's kingdom come on earth as is it is in heaven. The stone of justice.

The fifth stone is holiness. Opening our eyes to God around us and amongst us. That the Holy Spirit continues to move over the waters and over our hearts and souls. That the Holy Spirit is urging us to a new place where our faith affects every part, every aspect of who we are and how we live and move in this world. The world is filled with mystery and will not only be solved by microscope or petri dish but also a recognition of the holy aspect of life, love and a deeper calling in life. The stone of holiness.

Those are my five stones: thanksgiving, commitment, compassion, justice and holiness. Maybe not the same five stones that David reached down to pick up in the wadi but five stones I offer to you today. Five stones that Jesus summarized as Peace Be still to all the storms, the noise and the commotion of life in this world. Five stones that St. Paul described as purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God... as having nothing yet possessing everything. What are the five stones God is inviting you to pick up on this day?

Today Lillia is being baptised. Lillia we pray that as you get older you will discover five stones in your life. Five stones that guide and inform you in this life. May your Baptism mark you as Christ's own and lead you to discover more about what that means each and every day. For you may just discover like us, that thanksgiving, commitment, compassion, justice and holiness may just be what you need to face the Goliaths of this world.