

"The Cornerstone" A sermon based on Acts 4:5-12; Habakkuk 2:9-11 and 1 Peter 2:2-10. Delivered on May 5, 2026 by Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, MI.

*Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall and the plaster will respond from the woodwork. (Hab. 2:9-11)*

In this extremely graphic architectural allusion to the plundering of an oppressor nation which uses poignantly descriptive terms, the prophet Habakkuk indicts all human tyranny—all human inhumanity and greed which abuses other human beings. The prophet, writing during the height of Babylonian power, around 600 B.C. writes this descriptive metaphor as a part of a series of five "woe" sayings directed against a nation that plunders peoples and obtains gain by violence, It is a series of indictments against the oppressor nation of Babylon which was wreaking havoc on the nation and peoples of Israel at that time.

Although the prophet Habakkuk was, of course, not writing about Jesus—those powerful words "the very stones will cry out" seem to echo in our ears when we hear them up against the words of our Acts passage this morning, which quotes from Psalm 118:22 "This Jesus is \*the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.\*" This stone—this Messiah—rejected by the powers-that-be of Israel—the ones who were capitulating to the new Babylon--to Rome--to keep their wealth—but who were, nonetheless part of the original chosen builders of the kingdom. This Jesus—rejected by the rulers, the elders, the scribes, Annas the high priest—and all who were of the high-priestly family—This Jesus—so profoundly rejected has become the "head of the corner"—the cornerstone—the foundation of something new—the seal of the new covenant.

This Jesus of Nazareth, whom Luke, the historian, is careful to point out in Acts "you crucified"—who was, very literally, a stone crying out in agony from the cross—will be the rock on which we receive our salvation—a true cornerstone.

It is interesting that all of the New Testament references to "cornerstone" are either quotations or echoes from the Old Testament. This same Psalm—Psalm 118 is quoted in all three of the Synoptics as a sort of "moral" to the parable of the wicked tenants, which describes the rejection and triumph of Christ as the "head of the corner" — a description which seems to recall the image of the Body of Christ with Christ as the "head."

And, the "stones" mentioned in 1 Peter 2:7 imply that the faithful—like Christ—are "living stones" and Christ is the "cornerstone" of them. In Ephesians 2:20 the apostles and the prophets are the "foundation" and the "cornerstone" or the "capstone" is Christ. Again, the image of Christ as the "head" of the body seems to be intended.

Now a "cornerstone" in the Old Testament could have several meanings. It could be the large stone placed at the foundation of a wall angle to bind two walls together—perhaps an allusion to binding together the old and the new covenants? Or, it could refer to the top stone of a defense tower—perhaps an allusion to our defense against the oppressors—against the evil of today? Either way—the allusion is to stability and faith—something rock-solid and foundational, and all of the gospel writers seized onto this image as one that needed to be used in reporting the Good News of Jesus the Christ.

Cornerstones of modern buildings are often hollow. They are hollow, but secure as vaults, in order to contain historical documents such as might be of interest to peoples centuries from now who might uncover them when a building is

demolished for one reason or another. Put inside for posterity is perhaps a newspaper which reported something momentous, perhaps the latest translation of the Bible, perhaps a sample of the latest fad or fashion—a magazine—a gadget--whatever . . .these cornerstones are meant to pass down something unique of the history of the time in which they are laid.

Even this image of a cornerstone is not lost in our passage. This historical personage, Jesus, the fulfillment of biblical prophesy and historical witness, was rejected, and yet remains. Like the cornerstone of a modern building remains and its contents will remain in the future--to tell the story—the story of the time in which it was laid down and, in Jesus’ case this is THE story for all time.

"The very stones will cry out from the walls" laments Habakkuk some 2600 years ago—the stones are still doing so—the stones of Ukraine, Sudan, Iran, Gaza, Israel, Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan, Haiti, Republic of Congo, Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen and from the walls of our own cities due to the violence in the streets of the United States, as well as of the sites of all of the mass shootings in our country: 121 so far this year.

History does not help us here. Take for the example what, in our American history books, is called “The Cornerstone Speech.” It was a speech given by Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens in Savannah, Georgia on March 21, 1861, before the start of the Civil War<sup>123</sup>. The speech explained the differences between the Confederate and the U.S. Constitutions, the reasons for secession, and the defense of slavery as based on the inferiority of the "black race"<sup>124</sup>. The speech was named after the cornerstone of the new Confederate government, which was the belief that the "negro is not equal to the white man"<sup>24</sup>. The speech was delivered after seven southern states had seceded from the U.S. following the election of President Lincoln, who opposed the expansion of slavery<sup>135</sup>.

While progress has been made, systematic oppression and racism still rages on in our country. And yet, and yet, we have hope--because "the stone that was rejected by the builders has become "the cornerstone." Christ did not leave us alone to be crushed under the weight of the knowledge of our rejection of him—to be "stoned" by our own guilt, so to speak. Christ is indeed the "capstone" of his body here on earth—and we are his hands, his eyes, his feet, and his mouth; and it is, therefore, our job to build a bastion of truth on the foundation that we are given. And we do this carefully and faithfully, remembering always that we are spiritual beings having a human experience and no the other way around! It is our job to feel, hear, walk in, and state the truth—because even the "capstone" cannot stand by itself—it needs the other stones to hold it up or, at the very least, to keep it company! As our Old Testament lesson reminds us this morning, "The very stones will cry out" and it is our job to answer in comfort and in truth and in action, always remembering our broken and violent human history and always continuing to strive not to repeat it! Amen.

<sup>123,124,24,135</sup> Summarized from 5 sources on the Web

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