

The Stone that Became the Cornerstone

Scripture Reading: Acts 4:1-14

How do you construct a life?

A life!

What an idea! Such a holy, and tender thing, this life is.

Never more obviously, universally tender than we've become aware during this past movement in our symphony of shared years together.

It has been a movement of lament.

It isn't over yet, though we are hearing the change in intonation signaling that perhaps we are heading into the last verse. That a song of healing and even jubilation might be just around the corner.

Vulnerable are we, from the beginning of the beginning,
and even before that.

Our first bewildered blinks when our eyes meet the world,
In all of it's too-brightness.

And then we add with years, the armor of knowledge and seatbelts and social
cues and convince ourselves that we are protected,

Yet vulnerable we are...always...

Until our skin becomes thin, translucent once more, and our crepe paper
eyelids close for a final time.

It is what it means to be human – to live, perilously, vulnerably, persistently.
Alive.

All along the way this life is so deeply one's own

The well of the self, into which I dip

Again and again,

Day after day, sustained by waters mysterious to anybody outside our own
heads.

Who *knows* what you're keeping in that well of yours?

Yet it is also the only thing every one of us here has,
shared, the wonder of being

Alive.

The common factor of the human experiment.

The experience of being alive all at once.

It is the work of the soul to figure out how, out of that gift of being alive,

We will build our life.

Build, I mean, not merely the charming edifice of outward appearances
The grand illusion of how a life is perceived by others
The movie sets of existence,
There, a sweet display that looks like productivity,
There, an entire boulevard to convey success, (adjacent to an alleyway of
socially acceptable vices),
A whole city of appearances and false walls,
By which we judge our following and measure where the balance is tipped
between influencer and influenced.

Nor do I mean the prefabricated buildings we occupy,
The kind of existence that can be packaged into neat lessons,
Made into memes and misattributed quotes,
measured out in podcasts, sewn and sold onto throw pillows for \$29.99.

More, I mean how are we building and always building and again building our
lives,
the rough assemblage of minutes to days to weeks
Til we blink and the four-score and ten have passed us by,
Life moving on with or without our will imposed upon it,
As life tends to do.

We are nevertheless not merely along for the ride.
We build our lives. We do. We choose.
Not everything of course, much is beyond our control,
And yet it would be silly to pretend that we do not
make choices – however unconsciously – that determine so much
By who or what has our attention
By our presence in our minds and bodies.
By where we stand and who we stand beside.

Out of what then do we build a life?
How do you construct your moments and
years and accept that there are
indeed a thousand thousand choices and possibilities which
brought you right here, circuitously and perfectly, to where and who you are?

To resist the easy absolution of an unnoticed life. Yes I know my spirit
matters.. I notice my soul's hunger.
I will tend that particular garden when I am less tired
When I am less busy

When work slows down and the kids go back to school.
When. When?

But pause now and remember – of and on what do you build your life?
And why?

It might be easier to say that which does not belong
In the catalogue of materials by which we strive to create ourselves.
Not with bricks of hate or violence, bigotry or vitriol
Surely not.
Nobody ever intends to build their life from bricks of avarice or blocks of spite.

We build from materials more closely hewn to our everyday existence,
similar enough – you and I -
Our stones of family and work and greener grasses
Refusing to accept the seasons and storms of life,
Or give the final word over to the inevitabilities of the human experience.
If we build our walls solid and tall, strong and sunk deep into the earth,
Unchanging come any wind or weather.
We build on hope.
We can place brick atop brick atop brick until something – a life – takes
shape.
A partner
A promotion
A community
Perhaps a child and perhaps another
A passion
A hobby
Memories tenacious and tangible across the years.
We are formed by such as these.

I build my life, stone on stone, brick on brick, and bone on bone.
And hope on hope –
That I will be around to sit under the shade of any of the trees I have planted.
What then could it possibly mean to place every one of those stones, piece by
piece,
On a cornerstone of Christ?

It would mean a choice to have every other choice reshaped,
reoriented to this first stone sunk down into the ground– the foundation of the
foundation.

That Psalmist to whom Peter is reaching back across generations, to whom I am
reaching back across generations more,
Knew a good metaphor when they saw one
Knew a cornerstone was an image steadfast enough to last
Across continent and culture and centuries
Every culture builds shelter, spaces to protect that which we worship: our
families, our commerce, our gods.
The Psalmist knew you would know what it means
Peter knows you know what it means to make anything your cornerstone,
You and I know what it means to make Jesus Christ our cornerstone,
It is the act of doing so that tends to give us trouble.

For Christ is more than a guideline, more than a touchstone,
A talisman by which we bolster our guard against the darkness,
A way we soothe ourselves into thinking we have control.
Christ is no guarantee of success or ease in life.
He is no ward against hardship.

Christ. What Christ is. What Christ really is.

Is a choice.
A shepherd we agree to follow, even in our stubbornness,
Our sheepish ways preferring our independence to our wholeness.
Christ is a choice of humanity, always,
Our own humanity and also theirs.
And a choice to recognize, in Christ, there is no “theirs” and “mine”, because the
other - every other - is always an extension of myself, and I am an extension of
them,
Like two stars whose mingling brightness overlaps, eclipsing any darkness
between.

Christ is a daily, undignified, awkward choice for the rough terrain of relationship
over the safety of presumptions.

There is a reason this stone was rejected,
And is rejected... by us! ... over and over again as we sanctify our days around
our evident beliefs – the pursuit of our own convictions.

Choosing Christ is a decision to bless the life theocentric, with the gut punch
affirmation that of course God operates in ways I will never understand, and that
doesn't make God any less God, oh help my unbelief.

Christ is a choice whether or not to believe with every breath that you are so
completely and overwhelmingly loved.

To believe it and to live it. Every day.

To live like you believe it in your bones, that it does not exist like your nametag left for another Sunday, or a blanket draped around your shoulders on only the very bad days.

No. To live it like your belief is your very breath.

That someone chose you – you – for whom to be born, to live, and to die. All for the good of you.

And could that belief put a gentle hand resting over ours again and again, in every held back curse at a fellow driver, every moment when we are too harried and harassed by our own minds to see our parents, our kids, our neighbors in full?

Can that belief be at the root then of every conversation,
Including the unkind ones we have with ourselves?

Can that belief – that choice to follow Christ, to know and believe that you are so wildly and unbelievably loved – become the breath behind every note we sing, as we sing the life together?

Amen.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright at
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