

“Get Hot”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Acts 7:55-60; I Peter 2:2-10

In 1975, for the modest cost of \$4, you could purchase a pet rock that came with a 32-page training manual entitled, “The Care of Training of Your Pet Rock.” This stalwart companion needed little attention or upkeep: no feeding, walking, grooming, or medical care. None of them ever got sick, died, disobeyed, or ran away. By your laughter, I can tell you think it’s silly, but how could 1.5 million Americans be wrong? Now if you missed this rare opportunity back in the mid-70’s, do not despair, because in 2012, pet rocks went back on sale for only \$12.50. Reviewers agree that pet rocks are incredibly patient, excellent listeners, and never contradict your opinions.

All of this makes it harder to embrace Peter’s concept that each of us are living stones. It’s a strange simile, and one wonders why he chose it. Are we basically God’s pet rocks? I prefer Paul’s organic metaphors. He described us as members of Christ’s body, which intuitively makes more sense than the idea that we’re dull, inanimate rocks.

Perhaps living stones appealed to Peter because his name, given to him by Jesus, literally means “rock” in Greek, but there’s much more to it than that, as indicated by his statement, “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The clues “spiritual house,” “holy priesthood,” and “spiritual sacrifices,” undeniably point in a single direction: the Temple in Jerusalem, the focal point of Jewish worship, the location where God dwelled with his people.

Peter held the Temple in the highest regard. Since childhood, he made frequent pilgrimages to this most sacred space, and once he grew up offered sacrifices of thanksgiving

and penitence. Even after Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, Peter and the disciples went there. Even after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they went there. Despite the resistance the early Church experienced from those who didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah, Peter and his fellow disciples continued to visit and pray and worship God with them in the Temple. The first several chapters of The Acts of the Apostles tell the whole story.

Over time, though, Peter began to realize that the Temple, built of millions of stones, served as a symbol, as a template for God's true dwelling place: us. That's a big leap of imagination, a radical and scandalous thought in Peter's own day, but inspired by the Spirit, he saw how God expanded his residence from a single enormous monument to countless frail creatures like us. As bearers of God's presence, as living stones, we are meant to be joined together as a new home for God on Earth. It's a breathtaking reality.

However, it wasn't that long ago that a preacher spoke in this very room of Jesus as a wall-breaker, not a wall-maker, as one who came to shake things up, tear down boundaries, remove obstacles that separate people. That claim seems to contradict Peter's vision of the Church as a static structure, solid and bound together, built on the cornerstone of Christ, and more often than not the Church sees itself as Peter apparently does.

For instance, when we talk about the Church, we generally mean this beautiful and immovable space where we worship. We talk about "I'll see you at Church," or "I just came from Church," and what we mean is this building. We rightly admire these strong stone walls, how they are linked together, settled into place, an enduring witness to the power of God. Yet we speak too loosely when we call this place Church, because we and many others like us are the Church, each of us a living stone, bound together by love, acting as a sanctuary where God

becomes powerfully present in the scripture we hear and the prayers we offer, in the hymns we sing, in the sacrament of bread and wine we share, in the trickling waters of baptism.

And far from being a static structure, stuck in a single place and time, we living stones, where God chooses to dwell, are designed to both come here and then go forth into the world, to be a mobile sanctuary, vessels of God's grace, agents of God's purposes, revealing and sharing His forgiveness, His justice and mercy, His love. We go from this place to give hope for the future, to spread the joy of the good news of the Risen Christ. In short, to be a stone that lives means to move, to be dynamic, for movement distinguishes the animate from the inanimate, the living from the dead.

But there's no such thing as a rock like that. Sure, a very strong wind can move little pebbles. I've seen a hurricane do that. But Peter was thinking about great big Temple stones, the type that weighs tons; that would put these little stones here to shame. Perhaps this is where Peter's inspired simile breaks down. It's gone as far as it can go. Or maybe Peter's point was that a living rock is a rock transformed from its ordinary natural state, supernaturally moved by God. But I also wonder if we, like Peter, might be inspired to imagine, to explore how a rock can be a moving, living stone?

Well, Stephanie, the kids, and I are going out West to Yellowstone this summer, and while there's plenty to admire on the surface, I'm a little conflicted over the idea that the people I love most will be standing on Earth's largest volcano. It doesn't help that I found a movie on Netflix called "Super-volcano." You can probably guess the plot.

Underneath the geysers and those stinky, steamy mud pits lies an immense reservoir of magma, dozens of cubic miles in size, fueling the whole show up above. That baby's blown its top three times, as best we can tell, and if those eruptions occur at regular intervals, like Old

Faithful, then it could go off tomorrow or on July 9<sup>th</sup>, or 100,000 years from now. I prefer the latter, but whenever it does erupt, the magma, sort of like Peter, gets a name change. When the molten rock called magma comes to the surface, it suddenly becomes lava, and lava flows. No other rock on the Earth's surface moves like that.

Now when we first think of lava, we think of lava lamps. Push that image from your mind. Next, we think of danger and destruction, a red hot river that obliterates everything in its path, something best to be avoided, and it's hard to make the connection between that and the Gospel. Are we, as living, moving stones, meant to serve God in this way? Yes, because the Gospel is dangerous and sometimes destructive.

Just ask Stephen, the first martyr of our faith, or any of his martyr successors. No, wait, you can't. They're dead. So ask anyone who managed to stay alive, but had their old sinful way of life destroyed by the purifying fires of Holy Baptism. Ask death, destroyed by the resurrected Jesus. Reflect on your own life and how the Gospel changed it in ways that were, at the time, painful, because you had to sacrifice something you really, really liked to be a faithful disciple of Jesus.

But it's not all death and destruction. After lava cools, what you have left is new land where people can dwell, like Hawaii, which emerged from beneath the sea after eons of volcanic eruptions. The land formed by lava is one of the most fertile types of soil in the world. So if you like pineapple or coconut, send your thank you note to Lava, 1 Volcano Way, Hawaii.

We are God's lava, the living stones that move, the liquid stones unburied that pour out, that spread out and purify and create anew. But to be true to who we are, we need to be red hot, not lukewarm, and sometimes, that's a problem. We cool off, form rich new land, stop moving, and call it a day. Mission accomplished. Besides, that's the natural way, but God calls us to a

supernatural way of being, where for every square inch of new land, for every new dwelling place, for every human heart that makes a home for God, we get one degree hotter. We go back into the crucible of the caldera, reformed into living, liquid stone, so that we can rise again by God's grace to help achieve His purposes.

It's not easy. In fact, it's hard to understand, much less do, but in the Gospel of John, Jesus promised his original disciples and us that "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Now this is commonly misunderstood. Some people think you can ask for anything, like this week's winning lottery numbers, stick Jesus' name at the end, and you'll have it. But we know it doesn't work like that.

God isn't Santa Claus, or some sort of grace vending machine, where we plug in our prayers like quarters and get a treat in return. This becomes especially troubling when we pray for healing for ourselves or someone else, and it doesn't happen. We might wonder if God's not listening or if our faith just isn't strong enough, and that's corrosive. Instead, when we pray to Jesus, really pray, we learn over time to pray for the things that accord with God's Will, and that's how we receive the grace to get hotter.

When we gather to praise God here, we get hotter. When we realize and verbalize that the Church is a community of people and not a building, we get hotter. When we are kind, not cruel; generous, not selfish; humble, not judgmental, we get hotter. When we pause for moment of peace with God in prayer, despite the strife and busyness of our world: hotter. When we let God lift us from fear and insecurity, hotter.

When gets you hotter for the sake of Jesus? What keeps you liquid and living, yet as solid and as strong as a stone? That's our homework for this week, yours and mine, as God sends us forth from St. Luke's Volcano, ready to renew the world in His name. Amen.