

Proper 22, Pentecost 20, Year B  
(RCL)  
October 6, 2024  
New Song's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Jane Stewart

Genesis 2:18-24  
Psalm 8  
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12  
Mark 10:2-16

## On This Rock

I have a clear memory from my teenage years in which I was standing in the kitchen watching my mother slice tomatoes. Holding the tomato in the palm of her left hand, she was neatly slicing the tomato, the knife first piercing the skin on the top and then carefully slicing through toward her left palm. Suddenly realizing that I was watching this process, she sternly instructed that I was Never, Ever, to cut a tomato in this way.

I'm reminded of this story because today, I'm slicing a tomato into my palm – I'm doing the very thing which I have told other preachers never to do – I'm deviating from the lectionary for this sermon. But we're celebrating New Song's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, for heaven's sake! And try as I might, I could not figure out how divorce and adultery were in any way appropriate to this occasion.

So the scripture that I'm drawing from today takes us back to New Song's very beginning which started with a couple of trunk loads of rocks. We'll come back to that, because actually the very, very beginning of New Song started with a seed of an idea that Bishop Christopher Epting had to plant a new church in Eastern Iowa. Studies were done and the location was narrowed down to the rapidly expanding corridor between Iowa City and Cedar Rapids. Elizabeth Coulter, still in seminary at the time, was asked by the bishop to be the first priest of the new church before there was a church. Soon after that, John Harper was tagged by Elizabeth as New Song's first deacon. Never mind that John had also not yet been ordained – the devil is always in the details.

In the summer of 1994 volunteers staffed phone banks in Council Bluffs, Des Moines, Davenport, and Coralville with the goal of making 42,000 calls to people living in the Corridor

area asking them two questions: Are you currently a member of a church? And would you be interested in receiving additional information about a new church that is based on a new paradigm? From New Song's earliest days, it was determined that we would be a church without pews, kneelers, stained glass windows, or an organ, things most Episcopal churches would consider essential. Contemporary liturgy and music would be used rather than the Book of Common Prayer and Hymnal. And as John Harper puts it, "we didn't want any 'Jesus the Warrior-King' vibe – thus ruling out the singing of Onward Christian Soldiers as well as a number of other militaristic hymns. It would be a church where God's love would be shared and where shared ministry would be practiced. Not a church gathered around a minister, but a ministering congregation, as Elizabeth was known to say. When it was all said and done, 39,000 of the hoped-for 42,000 phone calls were completed thanks to the tireless effort of many dedicated Episcopalians across the state.

Meanwhile, to broaden the support base, like circuit riding clergy in the days of the old West, Elizabeth and John each set out to a number of churches in Eastern and Central Iowa to preach. Their aim was to enlist prayer companions in these congregations and to ask for donations to help make this dream of a new church become a concrete reality. Their preaching theme was from Matthew 16, verse 18, "On this rock I will build my church," which they wove into whatever were the given lectionary texts for the day. (Hopefully they didn't have any themes as challenging as divorce and adultery.)

This is where the trunk loads of rocks comes in. Elizabeth and Chuck had a friend who owned a rock quarry who allowed John and Elizabeth to take as many rocks as they thought they needed. They filled each of their trunks in preparation for their preaching tours. At each stop, they asked those gathered for worship to take a rock home with them and place it in a spot where they would notice it regularly – on the window sill above their kitchen sink, on their desk, or dresser, or mantelpiece. The request was that each time they saw the rock in the course of their day, that they would touch the rock and pray for the Spirit to be at work to bring New Song into being. Years later, people would see Elizabeth or John at a diocesan event and say, "I still have my rock, and I still pray for New Song!"

About 275 people showed up for New Song's first service in a ballroom at the Westfield Inn, both those drawn by curiosity sparked by the phone call they received, as well as Episcopalians from other, established congregations, there for moral support and to wish us well. An anthem was composed for the occasion and a choir came from what was then St. John's Episcopal in Cedar Rapids to sing it.

The verse, "On this rock, I will build my church" remained prominent throughout Elizabeth's time as our priest. When the Bishop's Committee (what we now call the Vestry) would meet, the bible would be opened that that passage. The verse was printed in every Annual Meeting booklet and kept as a centerpiece of New Song's life and ministry.

"On this rock I will build my church." In the passage from Matthew, Jesus is the speaker and the rock is Peter. To back up a bit and provide some context, the fuller passage reads:

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Peter, whose name is from the Greek word *Petra* and actually means "rock," was to be the foundation of the church. But this is by no means the only mention of rocks in scripture – there are at least 99 references to rocks or stones.

In Exodus 17:6 God says to Moses, "I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." In this case, the rock miraculously meets the people's desperate need for water in the desert.

In Exodus 20, Moses records the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone.

Psalm 62:2 says, "God alone is my rock and my salvation." So here, God is the rock.

Isaiah 32:2 speaks of a king who will reign in righteousness, and princes who will rule with justice saying, "Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the

storm, like streams of water in the desert and like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.”

Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the church as, "Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone".

Whether the rock is Peter, God, Jesus, righteous kings and princes, a source of safety or of life-giving water, or the tablets on which Moses recorded the Ten Commandments, rocks provide stability. Bishop Epting and the Diocese of Iowa knew that it would take rock-like stability to get the fledgling New Song off the ground and running. At the time, New Song was the first new church to be established in the diocese in 20 years, so our beginnings were a source of great energy and excitement in the diocese. We can thank the Diocese of Iowa for the moral, physical, and financial foundation that made us what we are today. We can thank scores of volunteers who made calls, and the many people who turned out for our first service and all who have come through these doors since then. We can thank those who offered their prayers and/or made contributions to the building up of this congregation. We can thank Trinity church for their support of a new congregation in “their” area, even to the point of some members of Trinity joining New Song to make sure it got off to a healthy start. And of course, we can thank our dear founding priest Elizabeth Coulter, and our incomparable founding deacon John Harper for their vision and hard work that brought the nascent idea of a church that sings a New Song to glorious reality.

These are some of the rocks on which New Song has been built. Are we the congregation that the diocese originally envisioned? Well, yes and no. While we are not the mega-church that some had hoped for in the burgeoning Iowa City/Cedar Rapids corridor, we are certainly an Episcopal church built on a different paradigm from other congregations in the diocese. And while we were at one time thought to be a bit too different for some people’s taste, we have grown up to take a respected place in the diocese where we are known for the effectiveness of our shared ministry approach, our refreshing liturgy and use of modern hymns, and our generosity in supporting outreach efforts to those on the fringes of society. Jerry Howe, one of New Song’s founding members once said that we are a church of God’s odds and ends, and the term has stuck. How could it not? We are indeed a rather motley crew, but the crazy quilt that is New Song is strangely beautiful and wonderfully unique. We wouldn’t want it any other way. Built on the

sure foundations of faith in God, hope that exudes joy, and love for one another and for our community, may we celebrate many more anniversaries in the years to come.

As you arrived for worship today, you may have noticed the basket of rocks on the back table. Please select one to take home with you, and, as was done 30 years ago, find a special place for it in your home where you'll see it regularly. A few are even small enough to carry in your pocket if you wish. When you notice it, pause for a moment, take it in your hands and offer a prayer of thanks for the gift that New Song is in your life as well as a prayer that God will continue to work through New Song to provide welcome for the stranger, hope for the struggling, a place of refuge for the wounded, vibrant Christian community for all who enter our doors, and most importantly, a place where faith is deepened and lives are transformed.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 16:13-18