

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 5, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 112
Matthew 7:21-29**

Sermon: When even the rocks are shifting

I want to begin by showing you some images:

We begin with a beautiful calming image – this is the scene out the front lane of our cottage in Nova Scotia. We take lots of photos of sunsets. Our cottage is not on the waterfront, this is a corner of our neighbours property in front of us.



I want to point out to you the ridge of rock between the green grass and the sand. This is actually the top of our neighbours' rock wall – it's a wall made of huge boulders that were trucked in and stacked up to ten feet high, in order to protect the shoreline from erosion, erosion caused by waves sweeping the softer sand and soil away from the shore. Most of our neighbours who have waterfront property have invested a lot of money in these rock walls, in order to maintain enough land to keep the cottage location.

I never take photos of the rock wall, not when I have the ocean and sunsets to look at, so you will just have to use your imagination.



This is what the rock wall looked like after hurricane Fiona last fall. They might not look like it from this perspective, but those are huge boulders, most of them only a grader could lift. The hurricane's barrage of wind and rain and crashing waves picked them up and scattered them like pebbles.

As I said, we don't have waterfront property, so our little cottage was quite a distance from the storm surge, and no trees fell on it. We were lucky to emerge from the storm unscathed.



Here is a shot taken a little ways down the shore, where there was no rock wall, just natural shoreline. You can see that post, which we think must be the well, with lines bringing water in to the cottage. So you can imagine that prior to the hurricane, that post would have been surrounded by green grass – metres of land which the storm surge clawed away, while the wind did away with the neighbours' roof.

So you can see that what Jesus said about building on rock (or at least behind rock) is true in part, the rock walls did protect some of the shoreline from worse destruction.

And here is an image that was often in the news that week – from Port au Basques in Newfoundland and Labrador. This is the proverbial house built on the rock. But what does it mean when even the rocks are shifted by some great storm?



When Jesus preached the famous Sermon on the Mount, this was the final point he made. The preaching stretches out between three chapters in Matthew's gospel and contains some of Jesus' most iconic teachings, like the Beatitudes, being like salt, don't hide your light under a bushel, the Lord's Prayer, the golden rule.

But Jesus concluded it all, according to Matthew, with this "showstopper" passage about choosing a life of faith that is grounded on a strong foundation. Jesus' first ever parable told in the first gospel (Matthew) is this one – the parable about choosing where to build your house of faith – you can choose the shifting sands or you can build it on rock. And the rock is the one that will stand forever.

Matthew's gospel underlines the power and strength of the storm.

In the gospel of Luke this same parable only says that the river rose in a flood – and the house on the rock stood firm. But in Matthew, Jesus gets right descriptive – the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on the house – that was what made the house on the sand fall. Then Matthew goes back and says it all again - the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on the house – but this time the house built on rock stood strong.

As we can see, however, even rocks shift and move sometimes. There are limits to the metaphor. Even rocks can shift and change. And our foundations will need shift and change with them.

So what is Jesus' message to us when the storms of life have been so strong, so powerful, that even the cornerstone of our faith has shifted? How do you hang on to your faith when a cycle of storms seems to rise and fall over and over until even the foundation feels like it like is being uprooted?

And maybe it's not losing your house in a storm. Maybe it's losing a parent or a partner or a child, maybe it's another terrible loss that makes you question whether Jesus actually knew what he was talking about. Maybe it's the diagnosis from the doctor that you were dreading, or the call from the school about your child, maybe it's a terrible news story about people or places near and dear to your heart. These are the things that cause your foundation to crumble and crack. Maybe it's the ending of a relationship, or the failure to achieve a life-long goal, maybe it's the poverty or unemployment over which you have no control.

It is only natural at these times to experience feelings of powerlessness, despair, even betrayal, in the face of these unfathomable crises. Like Jesus on the cross, we cry out "O God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?"

Because what else can you do when even the rocks under your foundation are shifting?

Sometimes it seems that we interpret Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as a series of platitudes, as beautiful traditional words that might look nice on a cross stitch or a bookmark or a facebook post. But if the words of the passage don't challenge you, then you probably aren't giving them your full attention. Someone once said that the Sermon on the Mount is like Jesus' own "I have a dream" speech. It may comfort the afflicted but, read clearly, it also afflicts the comfortable.

According to Oliver Wendall Holmes "Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but very few will use it as a rudder by which to steer."

Sometimes what we believed to be the solid rock foundation of our faith fails us. It could be a leader in our faith community, who once inspired us, but then makes a terrible mistake. Archeological digs that reveal the proof that some epic story in the Bible couldn't possibly be true, at least not in the historic sense. Those little snippets of scripture we have taken to be the "word of God" now need a deeper understanding, a

new approach. Or a conflict between churches or church members which demonstrates that sometimes the faith journey is more treacherous than peaceful.

Maybe it's because we have mistaken which rocks on which to build our house of faith. We can think back to a time when the people following Jesus thought that buying an indulgence or making a big donation to the church would guarantee their entrance to heaven. Or when living faithfully was equated with Victorian sexual morality. Or when the church created obstacles to membership or ministry if someone was female or gay or transgender or even divorced.

We've moved a long way from those definitions of right and wrong, but at one time they were the rock on which many faith communities stood. Some communities of faith still cling to certain definitions of what they understand to be righteousness.

When what they probably should be doing is going back to the Sermon on the Mount and hearing Jesus' challenge, his to align your words of faith with your actions of faith.

One of the things we learned about preaching when I was training for ministry is that sometimes it not so much about what you say as a preacher, but what people hear. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says it's not even about what you think you heard me say, in reality it's about what you do with it afterwards.

We should always remember that storms are coming, that storms are natural. In Celtic spirituality, the natural wildness of weather is considered to be one of its greatest gifts, because storms and fires and hurricanes are considered to be a cleansing and creative moment in the life of Mother Earth. That wildness is reflected in our own human ability to respond with creativity to transformation and new beginnings.

Following Jesus will not keep you safe from storms, it will not cause the hurricane to bypass your property because you were praying harder than your neighbour did. Bad things do happen to good people. However, the life of faith has the power and the spirit to give us the hope and creativity to endure the difficult times and make meaning even out of the topsy turvy ones.

On "I have a dream" Sunday we did a bit of a gospel hymn sing, to underline the origins of some of the African Spirituals that are found in our hymn book. Well, our next hymn is another one of those songs, a song about storms and what keeps us going in spite of those storms. This song is almost a theme song for the family camp we attend in Nova Scotia each summer, because that "over my head" chorus sounds like the tall tree branches that create a kind of ceiling or shelter in the camp. So it is sung with great gusto, even dancing in the aisles at times.

Sometimes we are having so much fun, though, we forget the very real storm and crisis out of which this song was created and sung, by Africans who were abducted and enslaved two hundred years ago. We forget how it became a song of hope more recently during the civil rights movement when people of African descent were once again fighting for the right to vote and buy houses and go to school like everyone else.

And we were reminded of the depth and tragedy of this theme in present day lives once again last week in news of Tyre Nichols's death after a traffic stop in Memphis. We are reminded that many of our neighbours have to live through storms that some of us don't even see.

People of colour have a whole different appreciation for the storms of life that are raging, the winds of strife that are blowing, and the tide of hate that rises. And yet over it all, we see their profound faith that there is music in the air, so there must be a God somewhere.

May we learn from their faith, bolster each other in the storms of life and live more respectfully together as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus, today and forever, Amen.