New year’s message 2021

As you come to him, the Living Stone

1 Peter 2:4-10

Key Verse: 5

“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Happy New Year! Praise be to God who redeemed us with the sprinkling the blood of Jesus and adopted us as His precious children. God has guarded our church as the apple of His eye in the year 2020 letting us pass through challenging times. As we embark on our new journey, we will learn about the vital relationship between Jesus and Christians both as an individual and community level through this passage. May God elate our vision and spirit as we receive God’s word for ourselves and church.

1.A holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices(4-8)

Look at verse 4. **“As you come to him, the living Stone- rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.”** Peter encouraged the early Christians to come to Jesus, the living Stone. The phrase, “**As you come to him**,” reminds us of God’s repeated invitation to his people for sinners. However, men could not come near to God due to their sins. God provided the Israelites with a high priest, the temple and the sacrificial system. They came to the temple to worship and offered sacrifices through priests. This sacrificial system was a shadow of the Messiah. This system of mediation was fulfilled through Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This indicated that people could come to God directly through Jesus who became the perfect sacrifice, our great high priest and the temple itself. Jesus is the new and living way opened for us.

Here, Jesus is called the living Stone. Someone might query, “living Stone? How can a stone be living? One of my children said, “I saw a stone fish, but not living stone.” If anyone discovers the living stone in this world, it would be a stunning news. If you search “living stone” in google, you will find these images. It looks like growing livingstones. But it is a plant called “**Lithop**s” that grows in South Africa.

Stones are inanimate objects. In what sense is Jesus the living Stone? It is because Jesus has life in Himself. John 1:4a says, **“In Him was life.”** All life originated from Jesus. Jesus said, **“I am the resurrection and the life.”** The living Stone is the Risen Jesus who has risen from the dead. The living Stone is a life-giving spirit. He gives life to all who come to him because Jesus lives forever. Peter describes further about the living Stone: **“rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.”** The baby Jesus was placed in a manger at his birth because there was no guest room available for him. The baby Jesus had to escape to Egypt due to the threats of the King Herod and grew up in Nazareth, a despised Gentile territory. Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders. Jesus was rejected by everyone on the cross but chosen by God. He was precious to God because he obeyed God’s will.

Look at verse 5. **“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** Now Christians are compared to living stones. Why did Peter pick up stones out of many objects? It is because livings stones are materials for building a spiritual house. In the past, we were like dead stones because of our sins. But when we come to Jesus, he breathes life into us and we become alive. We live because we are united with Jesus who is the source of life.

A spiritual house indicates a temple, a place of worship. Israel had built the first temple in Solomon’s time. Solomon conscripted 70,000 men to be carriers and 80,000 to be stonecutters, mason and foremen in the hills to build the house of God. 1 King 7:10 states, “**The foundations were laid with large stones of good quality, some measuring ten cubits and some eight.”** It took 7 years to build Solomon’s temple. The first temple was built with many stones and gold. Likewise, God needs spiritual materials to build a spiritual house, not regular stone, but living stones. God uses each living stone to build a spiritual house. Ephesians 2:20-22 say **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”** The Message version translates verse 5a as follows, “**as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life**..”

What is the purpose of building up a temple? It was built for God’s dwelling place. But God could not dwell in man made temple forever because of their sins. The glorious Solomon’s temple stood for 410 years and it was broken down by fire as the Babylonians invaded. The 2nd temple was rebuilt out of ashes by Zerubbabel after 70 years of exile and was renovated through extensive construction as Herod’s temple. As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him**, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent building!”**(Mk 13:1)

But Jesus said, **“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”**(Mk 13:2) This magnificent temple was destroyed completely in AD 70 by the Roman army leaving only broken part of western wailing walls. In the Old Testament times, God met his people in the temple made with stones by humans hands. But when God’s chosen people were disobedient to God, the temple worship lost life. Jesus said in John 2:9, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”** But the temple he had spoken of was his body(Jn 2:21). Yes! Now Jesus Himself is the new temple. God also build a temple in each living stone. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, **“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”** We ourselves are the temple of the living God.

Who is building the spiritual house? God does the work of building. God positions us where he wants us and relates us to each other. God is the master Builder and architect. Since we are being built into a spiritual house, we are not isolated stones. Instead, we are interconnected with one another because we are united with Jesus. Often, Christianity is only seen as a personal matter between God and me. But we all organically belong together with Jesus. The church is not a building, but the people of God. God’s dwells among people. The church is a spiritual community, founded upon Jesus. Each individual and family are spiritual houses being built on the cornerstone, Jesus. Scarborough UBF church and the global UBF church worldwide are also spiritual houses being built on the cornerstone, Jesus.

God also makes us a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices. A priest is one set apart and ordained to serve God and to mediate people to God. The priests in the old testament were anointed with oil and purified themselves with the blood of animals. Since Jesus was sacrificed as the Lamb of God once for all, we no longer make animal sacrifices. Instead we offer spiritual sacrifices. We worship God through Jesus who enable us to come to God’s presence by his own blood.

What are the spiritual sacrifices? It is a spiritual worship in the Spirit and in truth(Jn 4:24). Jesus said in John 4:21-23, **“A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem… when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth.”** Hebrews 13:15 says, **“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.”** All these are the acts of worship by singing, praying, devoting ourselves to God, proclaiming the gospel and so forth.

Look at verses 6-8. **“For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’ and ‘a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the message- which is also what they were destined for.”** Jesus is called as the precious cornerstone. Cornerstone is the foundation stone which determins the design and orientation of the building. Cornerstone is the rock which the weight of the entire structure rests. All other stones are placed on it. The Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, one of the 7 wonders of the world is the oldest and largest man made structure. These Pyramid buildings established with perfect cornerstones have stood for nearly 4500 years. But church established with Christ as the foundation stone will last even longer and forever.

The quotation in verses 6-8 is significant because Jesus Himself quoted this from the book of Isaiah 28 and the Psalm 118. Jesus quoted this as a conclusion of the parable of the tenants. Jesus told the religious leaders the history of Israel and the consequence of their rejection of God sent Son. There are two responses to Jesus either to trust in Jesus or not to believe in Him. To trust in Jesus means to accept him as the foundation of our life. It is to commit our life, our future, our family, all that we are and have to Jesus. To those who trust in Him, Jesus is the foundation of salvation, but to those who do not believe, Jesus would be the stumbling rock. May we both as individual and church put our trust in Jesus, the cornerstone and continue to be used to build a spiritual house. May we continually offer our spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God through our acts of worship.

2.The identities of the church (9-10)

Look at verse 9. **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** This verse is given to the Christian church scattered around the world. It is the fulfillment of God’s words in Exodus 19:5-6 through Jesus, the Messiah.

We are chosen people through Jesus who was rejected by humans, but chosen by God. It is not that we loved God, but that God loved us first and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We are a royal priesthood. Jesus who is our great high priest and eternal king has fulfilled both roles and combined them together for us. As a royal priesthood, we worship God together and pray for the world.

We are a holy nation. To be holy means to be separated from common. Now our citizenship is in heaven. Our lifestyle is not ruled by the world, but by the holiness of Jesus. The world worship idols, self-glory and physical pleasure. But God wants our church to live as a holy nation choosing holiness over worldly pleasure and ambition. Look! The title of our UBF calendar 2021! It is “**A royal priesthood and a holy nation**.” These are our identities in Jesus.

We are God’s special possession. The church is God’s own treasured people. Once we were slaves to sin. But now we belong to God because we have been purchased with a price. Some ordinary stuffs like shoes, canes, hats are significant because they once belonged to some famous figures. Once I saw a picture of a pair of small hockey skates of Wane Gretzky when he wore during his childhood in Brantford, Ontario. It was treated so special although it was worn out and dirty. Why? It is because once it belonged to a great hockey player. Likewise, God takes ordinary people and he works in them. That is why they are special.

In view of these blessings and new identities, what is our response? Look at verse 9b, **“that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** Many of us wandered around in darkness aimlessly in the past. But by one touch of the living Stone, we saw the marvelous light and become alive. So proclaiming the grace of Jesus is our priestly duty.What is the starting point of all these privileges and blessings? Verse 4a says, **“As we come to him.” Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened**.”(Mt 11:28) We must come to Jesus instead of looking at dark realities. We must come to Jesus in times of failures and despair. “As you come to him” means to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Coming to Jesus means to reserve a little more time for bible readings, prayers, joining bible study, singing praises, spiritual fellowship with other living stones and so on.

There are various kinds of livings stones in a community. Each one is a small and unique living stone. We thank God for calling each of us to participate in building project for a spiritual house. I am one of living stones. You are living stones. Each stone is alive and useful. Each stone is connected to the Living Stone Jesus as well as to neighbouring fellow living stones. We took a hard pathway never precedent in the past through pandemic. But God still brought us together a new year with God’s word. God gives us an opportunity to build up a spiritual house among us. Let us take a journey of “life together” in Jesus. May God continue to revive each living stone and thrive our spiritual community as we strive to come to Jesus this year.