

## **“Founded on the Rock”**

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August 25, 2024

*21“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ 23Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’*

*24“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” 28Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:21-29)*

It is so good to be back here with you all, but I am so grateful for the travels our family was able to take over the summer. One of the most picturesque and memorable adventures took place in the Balkan republic of Montenegro. On their way into the ancient town of Kotor, ships wind their way through the twists and turns of the Bay of Kotor, bounded on either side by the beautiful mountains of the Dinaric Alps. In one of the final turns, vessels pass two tiny islands. The first is the natural island of Saint George, which houses an historic 12<sup>th</sup> Century monastery.

The second, smaller island is known simply as “Our Lady of the Rocks.” Legend has it that, on July 22, 1452 – fifty years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue -- two sailors were returning home to the village of Perast after a day of fishing. It was a Saturday evening, and as they passed by the monastery of St. George, one of them spotted something strange on the surface of the water. Curious about what it might be, they turned their vessel toward a small rocky crag jutting up from the water. As they got closer, they were amazed to find an elaborately painted icon of the Madonna and Child, an image of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus. The sailors had no idea how such a treasure had come to rest on that rock. One imagines that it may have survived a shipwreck and floated for many miles before making its way into the bay. One of the sailors, who had long suffered from a crippling injury to his leg, bent over the bow and gently retrieved the painting from the crag. He carried it home with him, planning to present it to the priest and donate it to the church the next morning.

Waking up on Sunday morning, the crippled sailor woke up to find that his ailment was gone. After years of debilitating pain, he had been cured overnight. In light of the miracle, the faithful of that town pledged themselves to build a shrine on that rocky crag where the icon had been discovered. A procession of boats was formed to drop large rocks into the bay around the crag. Old sailing vessels were brought in, loaded down with stones, and sunk. Inspired by the story, and as an act of their own faith in the God who watched over them in the dangers of the sea, hundreds of local sailors would ritually drop a rock on the crag whenever they set out, offering a prayer to God for safe travels and calm seas. And



gradually, prayer by prayer, rock by rock, a new island rose from the water. The first known shrine on the islet was erected as a Serbian Orthodox church that very same year. Nearly 200 years later, the Roman Catholic structure that now stands on the island was completed and given the name “The Church of Our Lady of the Rocks.” The church remains a shrine for sailors all around the world, a place of faith, hope, and gratitude for anyone and everyone who asks for safe travels on the seas of life. They still come to this house of God, built and founded on the solid rock of their faith.

In one of his more memorable parables, Jesus shares the simple but enduring wisdom that how and where we choose to build our own houses matters. Wise people, Jesus says, build their houses on solid rock, so that when life beats on that house, when the inevitable winds blow and rains come, the house stands firm. By contrast, foolish people figure that any old place will do – as long as they work hard enough and long enough and use all their human skills – they can do their own thing and build something just for them. Great, Jesus says, will be the fall of those foolish people in their foolish houses.

It reminds me of those amazing sand castle competitions that take place on the great beaches of the world. Teams are assigned plots of sand and given four or five hours to work their magic using only sand, water, and hand tools. It is amazing what human beings can create in that short amount of time – towering and ornate structures, animals, and human tableaux. The entire beach is literally littered with beautiful sand art. But there is a reason that these competitions can only last five hours, because throughout the event, even as the teams work, the inevitable march of the tide is slowly but surely inching in. Moments after the contest is over, not even the smallest mound of all that work will remain.

If we want our house to remain, the only way to help that happen is to build it upon rock. And what does that metaphor mean for us, here on the corner of Larchmont and Forest Park Avenues? Well, the first thing we can say is that this house is still here – we are still here. From the very first rock of faith that was tossed onto this lot by Emily Lindsley over a century ago, to each of us who have come to this place this morning, people of faith have gathered in this spot to give voice and action to what we believe. We come to hear the Word of God read and proclaimed, trusting that in that Word we find the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We come to celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, to express with gifts of water, bread, and wine our enduring conviction that the living God is alive and present and active in our lives. We come here to bear one another’s burdens, and in so doing, to fulfill the law of Christ. We come here to say with the psalmist of old, that our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth... that the Lord is our keeper on every journey... and that the Lord will guard our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore.<sup>1</sup> The First Epistle of Peter bids every believer to allow themselves to be built, like stones, into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.<sup>2</sup> In a way, each person who has passed through this place has offered themselves as the kind of living stone that Peter was talking about. Each time we pass through these doors, each time we embody the church out in the world, we drop another little stone -- and each time we do, this island of faith rises a little higher, and gets a little stronger.

So much of what we do in the world is founded on things that do not endure. We work for money, for prestige, power, acceptance, or self-interest. And when we invest our time,

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 121.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:4-5

our energy, our thoughts, and our resources in those things that do not serve God or other people, we are doing little more than building spiritual sand castles. The structures may seem beautiful and glorious to us, but when the rain falls, and the floods come, and the winds start to blow, great will be the fall of the things we have labored so hard to build.

But if we truly invest ourselves in things that endure – faith in God’s word, faith in God’s promises, faith in God’s provision and protection on our journey through life – then we add ourselves as living stones to the church that remains firm and strong around the world, a global house that can never and will never be washed away, because it is founded on the bedrock of Christ.

We just missed it, when we set our own feet on the island of Our Lady of the Rocks in early August. Just a few weeks before, on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, the people of Perast, Kotor, and other neighboring towns met at sunset for an annual ritual. Gathering in boats, they lashed their crafts together and decorated them with branches from local ash trees. These ties that bind them together inspires the name for this annual festival, the “Fašinada,” which comes from the Italian word “fascia,” meaning “band” or “bandage.” Bound together in faith, they sail out together to the church, and each family casts yet another stone around the island. After a long winter of whistling winds, driving rains, and battering seas, this annual ritual is more than ceremonial. It is the repeated act and pattern of committed faith that helps to ensure the island’s stability, and keeps the strong foundation firm.

The faithful pattern of Fašinada in that corner of the world gives us a glimpse of our work and calling in this one. Here, may we continue to bind ourselves together, to bandage each other’s wounds, encourage each other in faith and service to our God, recommitting ourselves, Sunday by Sunday, day by day, to tending and strengthening Christ’s church in Larchmont and in our own lives. May we continue to dedicate ourselves to the joyful privilege of keeping this sanctuary open for every journeying spirit, and the sacred duty to offer our own humble contributions to the longstanding foundation of this house, built and founded on the solid rock of faith.

***Amen.***