

“Building on the Rock”

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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)

There is a longstanding myth about skyscrapers in Manhattan. It is said that the reason there are many skyscrapers Downtown, and many skyscrapers in Midtown, but no skyscrapers in the neighborhoods in between, is that the bedrock lies too deep below the surface in those middle neighborhoods. Geologically speaking, Manhattan is basically one big, 13-mile boulder, but the boulder is not flat. And it is true that the bedrock is closest to the surface at the southern tip of the island and in Central Park, where the bedrock actually pops up to make the rocky playground that everyone loves to climb on.

But the truth is that parts of downtown, where many tall buildings scrape the sky, is built on some of the worst ground on the whole island. In parts of the financial district, between the surface soil and the bedrock, lie huge pockets of quicksand. You thought it was all in the desert, right? Nope. It’s right here. While bedrock makes the best foundation, quicksand is the worst. It was a real problem, and builders had to spend real money, and put their workers in real danger, to get through it.¹ It would have been a whole lot cheaper and easier to build a skyscraper in Chelsea or Soho than it was near City Hall, but people wanted and needed space on Wall Street. So, they did what they had to do to get down through the quicksand in order to build on the solid rock.

In this stewardship season, our theme rests upon these natural laws of geology and physics. The lives we are building – both individually and as a church – will be only be strong if we build them on the right kind of foundation. Scripture is clear about what this foundation should be. As it says in Ephesians, when we come together as individuals in the church of Jesus Christ, we *“are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 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.”*² When Christ is the cornerstone, and

¹ Jason M. Barr, “The Bedrock Myth and the Rise of Midtown Manhattan (Part I),” <https://buildingtheskyline.org/bedrock-and-midtown-i/> July 29, 2019.

² Ephesians 2:19-21.



we understand that we ourselves are the foundation, then whatever we build together will be built on the solid rock. And though the driving rains may come and destructive winds may blow, this house will not fall.

It is important to note that, in Christ's teaching, it is not a question of "if" the floods, rains, and winds may come. They will all come regardless of what we do. As Christ sees it, the only variable is how prepared we will be... how thoughtful, focused, and intentional we have been in our building. As the poet Parker Palmer has written, everything that we humans do or build will eventually crumble, erode, and fall away. *"Sooner or later,"* he writes, *"everything falls away. You, the work you've done, your successes, large and small, your failures, too. Those moments when you were light, alongside the times you became one with the night. The friends, the people you loved who loved you, those who might have wished you ill, none of this is forever. All of it is soon to go, or going, or long gone. Everything falls away, except the thread you've followed, unknowing, all along."*³

What Palmer describes as "the thread" is something mystical... something enduring... something that forms the very core of who we are. The "thread" is what knits us together – as individuals and as a community. As beautiful as that metaphor is, I prefer to think of this enduring part of our lives as something more concrete... something more akin to the metaphor Jesus uses: a firm foundation. By definition, a foundation is a "base from which everything else develops."⁴ It is the solid rock upon which everything of value is built. It is also what will remain when, as Parker Palmer says, everything else has fallen away.

When I went to the Holy Land in 2008, and gazed upon what many people consider to be the house of the Apostle Peter, all that is visible is a low stone foundation. If so, then Christ himself would have been in that very spot, teaching, praying, and worshiping with the early church. But today, the only thing left is the foundation. The walls and roof, originally made of wood, thatch, and clay, have long since fallen away and turned to dust. The same is true of the famous churches later founded by Paul in places like Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Philippi. And yet, after all this time, their mark on the world is still visible, because those foundations were built on the solid rock. Someday, these walls will fall as well. And the only thing that will determine what lives on and remains here, in this place, is how thoughtful, focused, and intentional we are in maintaining a firm foundation.

One of the harsh realities of being a pastor's kid is the likelihood that you will move at some point in your childhood. It is also very likely that such a move will come at a time that you would never choose. For example, when I took the call to serve a church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, Molly had just finished her sophomore year in high school. She had good friends. She was doing well in school. She was getting playing time as a young player on the volleyball team. And when we told her we would be moving, she immediately started to cry. "Please don't do this to me," she said. "Not now."

In the same way, when I accepted the call to come to Larchmont, Kate had just finished her freshman year. In the midst of COVID, she had initially been very excited about the possibility of moving to New York. But as she returned to a more normal experience in the Charleston County School of the Arts, she began to realize just how much she would be giving up. The move was really hard for her, and even though she continually put on a

³ Parker J. Palmer, "Everything Falls Away," <https://parkerjpalmer.substack.com/p/awash-in-an-ocean-of-angry-words>, April 25, 2025.

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/foundational>

brave face, trying to find her way as a transfer into Mamaroneck High School was painful, difficult, and very lonely. Driving her to school that fall, it broke my heart to drop her off each morning, knowing what the day would likely bring.

I could not help but think about these moments the other night. We had gone as a family to see the musical “Hamilton” again, because Leslie Odom, Jr. is currently reprising his Tony-winning turn as Aaron Burr. In the show, Burr and Hamilton sing a duet to their newborn children. They sing it knowing that the coming Revolution will be difficult and costly, but they commit themselves to making sure that the sacrifices would count for something good, something that would endure. Burr makes this particular promise to his little daughter Theodosia:

You will come of age with our young nation.

We'll bleed and fight for you. We'll make it right for you.

If we lay a strong enough foundation, we'll pass it on to you.

We'll give the world to you, and you'll blow us all away.

I had heard the song many times before, but I heard it in a new way on Thursday night. I thought about how Molly, a little over twelve hours after moving into the state of South Carolina, got up to walk into the largest high school in the state, not knowing a soul. And over the next two years, she sifted through the sand until she found the solid rock beneath her feet... the foundation that had been under her the whole time.

And I thought about Kate, who at the end of her sophomore year, stood on a stage and sang a duet to the crowd gathered in the high school theater. By that time, she had begun to get her footing. The song she sang was “Dear Theodosia,” and she blew us all away.

Life is really hard for young people these days. They are never more than a few phone clicks away from real darkness and danger, and there is quicksand everywhere. They are coming of age in our nation in a very tricky time. And it is up to us to commit ourselves to making it better, making it right for them. It is up to us to lay a strong foundation... one that we can pass on with confidence and assurance... one that is strong enough to endure the floods, and the rains, and the winds that will surely come.

And now I am really gonna start preaching. Where do you think that kind of foundation can be found? Where out there... out of all the things we prioritize in the course of a day... the course of a year... the course of a lifetime... where will we find the strongest foundation for living? Where is the one rock in our lives that will always be there, the one stronghold that no flood can wash away?

You know the answer. I don't think you would be here if you didn't at least have an inkling of the answer. The most important building you will ever do – in your own heart, and in this world – is the work of faith building. That work site is a place where Christ is much more than a nice guy in nice old stories who never really challenges us. No, that work begins with Christ as the bedrock, the stronghold, the refuge, the cornerstone of who we are and what we do. This kind of work is not done by his occasional admirers, but by his true disciples – those who commit themselves to being part of the foundation that not only keeps this place standing, but keeps it working, teaching, serving, and defending what is good and right and decent in this world.

The wise ones, Christ says, are the ones who hear these words and act on them. The rain will fall, the floods will come, and the winds will blow, but the house they build will not fall, because they built it on the rock. **Amen.**