

Living Stones

God invites us to be as living stones built together with Christ, to become and be God's people. Throughout the ages, living into this reality can be fraught with peril, whether because of our own need to trust, learn, and grow, or from those who see us as an enemy. In all of this, God is faithfully loving and present.

Focus scripture: Acts 7:55–60

Who is this Stephen? In Acts 6, we are told that he is one of seven chosen to oversee the just distribution of food among the growing number of disciples. Criteria for selection included being "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" with Stephen noted as being "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" who "full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." Stephen debated with such irresistible wisdom that others stirred up false testimony of blasphemy against him. His subsequent testimony in Acts 7:2–50 narrates God's work through history beginning with Abraham, through the time into Egypt, the calling of Moses and deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the time in the wilderness, and later building of the temple by Solomon. A theme through Stephen's sermon is summarized in verse 51: "You stiff-necked people..." At this point, Stephen's fellow Jews who sit on council are enraged and the scripture passage tells us of the end of Stephen's life. His dying words echo those of Jesus (Luke 23: 34, 46). And with Stephen's death we are introduced to Saul, later to be re-named Paul.

Stephen's prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," echoes the prayers for deliverance by the psalmist in **Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16**. The prayer for help interweaves with a proclamation of God's faithfulness and steadfast love, even in the presence of enemies and when rocks are needed for refuge. There is a sense of intense focus on God, as with Stephen, that reflects God's glorious gift of presence even in dire circumstances.

In **1 Peter 2: 2–10**, the readers are thought to have been Gentiles who became followers of the Jewish messiah Jesus. They are scattered throughout the lands of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas under the rule of the Roman Empire and its culture. This letter aspires to guide and inspire them in their daily lives as they are grown into the ways of being God's own people, recipients of God's mercy and inclusion. The language/theme of rocks/stones continues through this passage with Christ being portrayed as both a precious cornerstone for those who trust in him and as a stumbling block to those who don't. This theme connects in part to today's gospel reading.

John 14: 1–14 Jesus, as part of his farewell discourse before betrayal and execution, speaks words of reassurance to his disciples. The Greek word *πιστεύω* is used six times by Jesus to describe the kind of relationship desired of the disciples with Jesus, with God. The NRSV translates this as "believe," which for many living in the 21st century bears a primary emphasis on intellectual thought and assent. Other translations of the word – have faith, trust, have confidence, entrust – may more fully convey the involvement of our whole beings and lives with God.

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Through these scriptures, we are challenged to dwell on living and dying as God's people. What causes you to stumble? What gives you life?



Focus scripture

Acts 7:55–60

Additional scriptures

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

1 Peter 2:2–10

John 14:1–14

**Faithful God,
be my refuge in
all of my living
and in my dying.
Help me when I
stumble. Grow me
into your fullness
of life with all of
your people, for
your purposes
and glory. Amen.**

Lection Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children enjoy being affirmed for the ways they can serve the community. They are beginning to enjoy problem-solving and discerning how to help others. The symbol of the hand shape is a visual encouragement to the children to understand that their actions as well as their words can contribute to building up the faith community.

The story on the resource sheet “[Brave Witness](#)” includes an optional section. If your group is composed of primarily younger children you can choose not to include this last section of the story describing Stephen’s death. If your group includes primarily older children and you include the last part of

the story, plan to spend some time with the children helping them to “debrief.” Older children in this age group may have become desensitized to violence. Studies indicate that the average child in North America will have watched thousands of acts of televised murder by the time they reach age 12. Depending on their exposure, some may appear indifferent and some will be horrified. The session offers an opportunity to discuss how rage and prejudice can still lead to the death of innocent people today. Pray that the children and you will gain a clearer sense of the power and strength an abiding faith provides to meet whatever life brings.

Prepare

Before the session

- Read and prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, Acts 7:55–60, and [biblical background material](#) (p. 83).
- Set a worship space with white, gold, or yellow cloth, candle, and Bible with bookmark placed in focus passage.
- Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 3) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 3), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- Bring a green plant in a pot.
- Bring, if possible, song, “Come into God’s Presence” (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Engage

- Bring “Story line” from last week.
- Bring resource sheet “[Brave Witness](#),” construction paper hand shapes.
- Game group:** no additional materials needed
- Dicussion group:** no additional materials needed

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- Easter zone:** copies of resource sheet “[Building Community](#)”
- Community zone:** copies of badge shape from resource sheet “[Easter Resources](#)” (p. 119), wide paper ribbon
- Art zone:** poster board (divided in half diagonally with a line), brown or grey construction paper
- Craft zone:** copies of resource sheet “[Fridge Magnets](#),” card stock, adhesive magnetic sheets
- Outreach zone:** paper, envelopes, copies of resource sheet “[Tips for Writing Letters](#)” (p. 120), information about justice issues go to www.seasonsonline.ca, click on Links tab

Bless

- Bring, if possible, song “I Will Sing” (p. 17 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).



Living Stones

Scripture

Acts 7:55–60

FOCUS To hear how we, like Stephen, can show God’s compassionate love

Gather

Welcome the children and remind them that we are in the Season of Easter. Invite them to share experiences from the past week.

Opening ritual

Gather in the worship space and lead the children in the ritual, inviting them to participate as indicated:

We light this candle to celebrate the light of God’s presence in our lives.

(Invite a child to light the candle.)

During the Easter season we celebrate our new life in Christ.

(Invite a child to place the plant on the worship table.)

We are witnesses to God’s love and light, as we follow Jesus, the risen Christ.

All: Alleluia!

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song “Come into God’s Presence” (p. 9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #2 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

Loving God,

we know you are here with us.

May we have courage

as we follow the ways of Jesus. Amen.

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Connecting with the focus

Invite children to play a game of charades. Choose five volunteers and whisper a word to each (such as Welcome, Love, Share, Help, Hug). Have them mime these without using words while the rest of the group guesses what they are doing. Explain that today we will hear a story about someone who used both actions and words to share God’s love.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Story line Look together at the story line begun last week to remember the stories they heard so far during this Season of Easter: “Jesus is alive” (**John 20:1–18**); “Thomas” (**John 20:19–31**); “Emmaus” (**Luke 24:13–35**), and “the first Christians” (**Acts 2:42–47**). This week’s story is about Stephen, one of the first Christians.

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship area and use the bookmark to open it to the book of Acts. Remind the group that this book tells the stories and actions of the first followers of Jesus. Today we will hear about how that community of followers grew and some of the things they did.

The Bible story

Use the resource sheet “[Brave Witness](#)” to present the story based on **Acts 6:3–13** and **Acts 7:51–60** (note this story includes stories from the chapter before this week’s focus passage). Begin by gathering in a circle and distributing the paper hand shapes. Invite children to participate by taking turns to add their hand shapes as the story is told.

Wondering questions Use some or all of the following questions to wonder together:

- **What are some things that Stephen and the other deacons did to share God’s love?**
- **Who are the “deacons” like Stephen in our church today?**

For older children:

- **Why do you think the authorities were so upset with Stephen?**
- **What do you think gave Stephen the courage to say what he said?**

Story line Print the focus passage reference and the word “Stephen” on another sticky note and add it to the story line begun earlier.

Exploring the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Game group *(for younger children)* This group will have the opportunity to identify ways in which they express their faith. Invite children to think of one way they spread God’s love, such as caring for a pet, befriending someone, or sharing what they have. Place your hand in the middle of the circle, palm down, and say, “We witness to God’s love by...” Have the children take turns offering an idea as they place a hand on top of yours to

create a stack. When all have contributed, count to three and shout “Amen!” Repeat until children run out of ideas.

Discussion group *(for older children)* This group will have the opportunity to explore further Stephen’s courage. Even in difficult times Stephen had the courage to say “I am a follower of Jesus” and to stand up for what he believed. Discuss the following question:

- **When can it be hard to be a follower of Jesus today? Why?**

Reporting Invite the game group to share their ideas for spreading God’s love and invite the discussion group to share some responses to the question.

The Bible story and us

Stephen believed with all his heart that Jesus was sent from God and that people should follow Jesus’ teachings.

- **What are some ways that our church follows Jesus’ teachings today?**

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Easter zone: Community of love** It takes everyone working together to care for a church community. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Building Community](#)” and review the questions together. Discuss where you may find the answers. Go to different areas of the church building as appropriate. (Adapt the list of questions to suit your church situation.)
- **Community zone: Badges** *(for younger children)* Many people within and outside of the church community work, like Stephen did, to show God’s love and care. Distribute badge shapes (from resource sheet “[Easter Resources](#),” p. 119) and read the words aloud. Have the children decorate these with bright colours and show them how to fold a piece of paper ribbon in half and staple to the back of the badge, near the bottom. Elicit suggestions from the children for those they might like to present with the badges. Encourage them to make extras to share with people at home and in their neighbourhood.
- **Art zone: Poster** *(for older children)* Bible readings remind us that stones can be used to destroy or build up. Have the children cut stones from construction paper. Each child should have several stones of various sizes and shapes. Invite children to think of words or actions that do harm, write these on some of their paper stones, and glue them to form an arrangement on one side of the poster board. Then have them write words or actions that help to build community on the remaining paper stones and use them to create a structure on the other side of the poster board.
- **Craft zone: Fridge magnets** In the story of Stephen, stones were used to harm. In other Bible readings stones are also symbols of strength and endurance. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Fridge Magnets](#)” and read the adaptation of Psalm 31:1–5. Invite children to cut the shapes out, decorate them, glue them onto pieces of cardstock and attach adhesive magnet strips to the backs. Encourage them to keep one magnet and give the others away.



❑ **Outreach zone: Letter writing** (*for older children*) Just as Stephen was, people all around the world are still being persecuted for their beliefs. Share the information you have gathered to talk about the work of Amnesty International and their letter writing campaigns. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[Tips](#)

[for Writing Letters](#)" (p. 120) and discuss together some ideas for writing letters to officials in countries that violate human rights. Invite children to write some letters on behalf of several prisoners of conscience.

Bless

Gather around the worship area, light the candle again, and invite children to spend a few moments in silence looking at the flame.

Sing if possible, the song "I Will Sing" (p. 17 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 3; #28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 3).

Pray Lead the children in the following simple breath prayer. Begin by breathing in and out, slowly and

deeply. Read each line slowly and quietly. Repeat the prayer several times.

As you breathe in, say silently, "Peace be..."

As you breathe out, say silently, "with you."

Then, as you breathe in, say silently, "Peace be..."

As you breathe out, say silently, "with me."

Blessing Offer the following blessing: "God's peace and God's Spirit go with you."

Reflect

In what ways can you highlight the gifts and insights of the children within the larger community? As a model of faith for the children, how are you allowing them to hear you speak of your faith and how you try to act?



BRAVE WITNESS

(based on Acts 6:3-13 and Acts 7:51-60)

**If the group is mostly young children
 end the story at the *** mark. If your
 group includes older children
 continue telling the
 story until the
 end.**

(Distribute the construction paper hand shapes, giving several to each child.)

After Jesus wasn't with them any more his followers and friends began meeting together. They gathered in each other's homes to remember Jesus' teachings, to pray, and to eat meals together. They were always ready to lend a hand to those who needed help. *(Place a few hand shapes in the middle of the circle, beginning to form the outline of a heart shape.)*

This was the beginning of the first Christian church. Soon more and more people came to find out about Jesus. Soon more and more people wanted to learn how to live in the way that Jesus taught. *(Add more hand shapes.)*

The church leaders realized that they needed more people to tell the story about Jesus and say the prayers. They needed more people to care for all those who needed help. *(Add more hand shapes.)*

So they asked some of Jesus' followers to be part of a special group of leaders called deacons. They chose people who were full of faith and God's Spirit. *(Add more hand shapes.)*

One of those people was named Stephen. *(As you say each of the following phrases, add more hand shapes to complete making a heart shape.)*

When people were sick, Stephen cared for them.
 When people were hungry, Stephen took them food.
 When people didn't have enough to wear, Stephen gave them some clothes.
 When people were very poor, Stephen gave them some money.
 When people were lonely, Stephen visited them.
 Stephen told everyone he met about Jesus.

(Trace around the heart shape with one finger.)

Stephen helped to build up the church community by talking about God's love and showing God's love in action, just as Jesus did.

Stephen did this work because he loved God and believed that Jesus was sent by God. However, this strong belief got Stephen into trouble. Other religious leaders in Jerusalem didn't agree with Stephen's beliefs. They wanted Stephen to stop talking about Jesus. They plotted against Stephen and told lies about him. Stephen was arrested and taken before the religious judges. *(Remove one paper hand to "break" the heart shape.)*

Stephen was brave. He wouldn't stop speaking about Jesus and about his beliefs. Stephen was dragged away and taken outside of the city. But even when a crowd began to throw stones at him, Stephen was filled with God's love. He prayed, "God, please forgive these people for what they are doing."

And then Stephen, the faithful deacon and follower of Jesus Christ, died. This terrible and sad death brought all Jesus' followers closer together. *(Place the single paper hand back in the heart shape.)* Everyone became braver because of Stephen's courage.



Building Community

Where do people at your church find books about God and about Christian living?

Does your church have a weekly worship bulletin or order of service? Who prepares it? Where is this work done?

Where do people make tea, coffee, and meals in your church?

If your church has a choir or a singing group, where do they practice?

It takes many helpers to build a church community. No one can do it alone. Every member has an important contribution to make. Learn more about your church and find out how the words and actions of many people in your faith community help provide ministry. Look at this list of questions and see if you can find out where these things happen in your church or who provides these services. When you have found the answers, fill in the hand shapes using crayons or markers.

Where does your church collect food that is shared with others?

Where does your church share with one another?

Where do people of all ages pray together?

Where do people worship together at your church?

Where do the younger members of your church meet to learn about God?

Who keeps your church clean and tidy? Where are the cleaning supplies kept?

What is one thing your group can do to help show God's love?

What is one thing you can do to help build up your community?



Fridge Magnets

Psalm 31:1-5 (adapted)

God, you provide a safe place for me.

Listen to me now.

Be a rock of safety for me, a hiding place for me.

Indeed you are a rock, a safe place for me.

Take me away from danger.

God, I give myself to you, my rock.

Psalm 31:1-5 (adapted)

God, you provide a safe place for me.

Listen to me now.

Be a rock of safety for me, a hiding place for me.

Indeed you are a rock, a safe place for me.

Take me away from danger.

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Psalm 31:1-5 (adapted)

God, you provide a safe place for me.

Listen to me now.

Be a rock of safety for me, a hiding place for me.

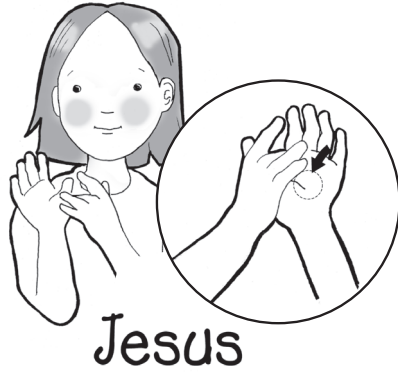
Indeed you are a rock, a safe place for me.

Take me away from danger.

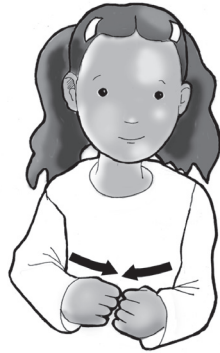
God, I give myself to you, my rock.

Easter Resources

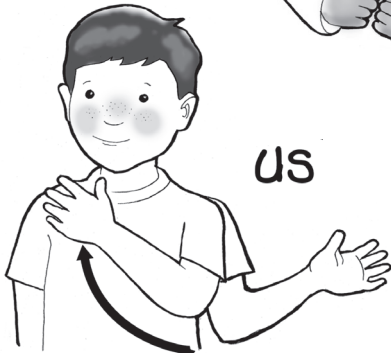
Hand signs



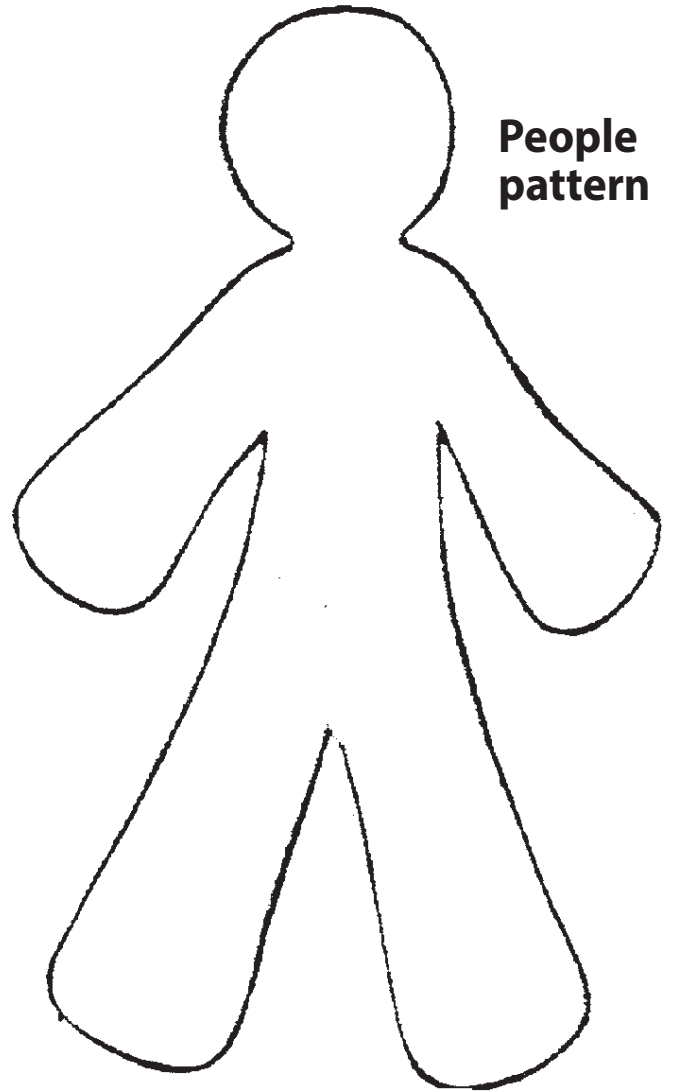
is with



us



People
pattern

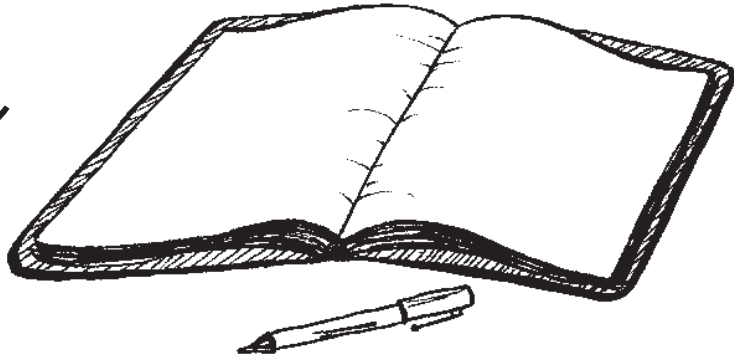


Badge
pattern

Thank you
for sharing
God's love



Tips for Writing Letters



Brainstorm some ideas on a piece of paper. Think about those you are writing to and what you are trying to persuade them to do. Try to narrow down your list to one main point, either an idea you want them to accept or an action you want them to take. Write down as many supporting reasons as you can think of for this idea or action and then pick the three that you think will be most persuasive.



Compose a draft of your letter. In a sentence or two, explain why you are writing and what you would like your recipient(s) to do. Follow this with the three top arguments you have chosen. Each argument can be as short as one sentence or as long as a paragraph. Do your best to keep the body of the letter brief, polite, and to the point.



Re-read your draft and find ways to improve it. Cut out unnecessary words. Replace boring verbs and vague descriptions and use words that will catch the readers' imagination and help them understand why they should act on your arguments. Make sure that your facts are true. Add an appropriate salutation and closing, such as "Sincerely yours" and make sure the letter is formatted correctly and doesn't have any spelling or grammar mistakes.



Leave your letter for a day or two, if possible, and come back to it for another edit after this break. Show it to a parent, teacher, or friend to see if they can suggest any ways to improve it. If you send your letter by email, print out a copy for yourself. If you send your letter in the post, write or print it on high-quality paper and mail it in a clean, matching envelope.

