

Joshua 4:1-7
I Corinthians 11:23-26

Memorial Day
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 29, 2022

Memorial Stones

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

The book of Joshua marks a turning point in the narratives of the Old Testament. It recounts the transition of landless wanderers into the landed people of Israel. In the process, it depicts a glorious entry into the promised land, with the virtually unhindered conquest of vast portions under the leadership of Joshua.

Our Old Testament lesson from Joshua 4, recounts the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and the Memorial that Joshua ordered built so that future generations would know of this mighty act of their God. Listen to these words from Joshua 4:1-7...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson is from Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth. In chapter 11 we hear of the "Institution of the Lord's Supper." When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we *remember* what our Lord did for us, and our salvation. We *remember* his broken body, his shed blood. Listen to these words from verses 23-36...

Sermon

After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the Israelite people now cross the Jordan River, a crossing made possible by the God who had long ago established his covenant with this people through Abraham. That covenant was carried forward by Isaac and Jacob. When Jacob's sons threw their brother Joseph into an empty pit with no water, he was subsequently sold to Potiphar in Egypt. And God turned that evil deed into good. Through Joseph he brought the Hebrew people into Egypt where they might not starve from the famine

that was ravaging the land. But the people were not yet the powerful people they would become, and they became slaves of the Egyptians. Yet God cared for his people; he deplored their slavery and their suffering, and one day by the hand of Moses he led them out of Egypt, parting the Red Sea as a means of escape. On Mount Sinai God gave the people his divine law—the Ten Commandments. Yet, many of the people didn't always trust God. To be sure, things weren't easy during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Sometimes they even longed to be back in Egypt, where at least they knew security. But God wasn't going to give up on this people—stubborn and faithless as they were at times. God had called them for a special reason—to know his blessing and to be a blessing to all the nations.

Now the great leader of the people, Moses, along with his brother Aaron were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, due to an instance of unbelieving rage when Israel complained about a lack of water. And they both died before they reached the land of milk and honey. But God raised up one who would lead the people just as Moses had. That man was Joshua, and it is Joshua who will now lead the Israelite people across the Jordan River and into that Promised Land.

It was one of the climactic events in all of biblical history. The Israelites had waited forty years, but now the time had come. Behind them they leave four decades of wandering around in a barren wilderness and the tragic memories of countless funerals for an entire generation of people who would not trust God's promises. Before them lies a land richer than their dreams, more fruitful than their hopes, and more beautiful than their imagination. Now it is theirs by God's steadfast promise. It must have felt unreal to finally stand in Canaan. Kind of like when you cross the threshold of your first home. You've envisioned it, planned for it, imagined what it will be like to live in it...but when you step through the front door, you can hardly believe it!

However, when the Israelites arrive at the Jordan, they find that it is at flood stage, menacing in its speed and dangerous in the debris it carries. Its crossing is impossible. But God intervenes, performing a miracle that parallels the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt. God rolls back the waters of the Jordan River, just as he had done with the Red Sea.

Well, after the people had safely crossed the river, what would be next? Conquering the land? No, first God directs them to build a memorial with twelve stones, drawn from the dry riverbed by twelve men, one from each tribe. The twelve stones are to be set up in the form of a monument at Gilgal. It was a memorial of a great event that should not be forgotten. Later when the children and grandchildren of this people would see the stones and ask, “What do these stones mean,” they could be told of what God had done for them at the Jordan. They could be told how God had called this people and made a covenant with them to be their God and they to be his people. How God had led them out of Egypt, through the waters, into the wilderness, and now across the Jordan to the Promised Land. Then they would know and could tell other people that their God is mighty and that they should honor and revere God forever. So, this memorial at Gilgal was not for Israel alone, but for the whole world. The record of divine Providence in dealing with one nation is the inheritance of all: *That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord.* (4:24)

Likewise for Christians is the Lord’s Supper a memorial—a service of remembrance, lest we forget what our Lord did for us on Calvary. People can gain strength from a common memory, as they recall experiences of the past. Experience can be a great teacher, if we are willing to learn from it.

After the Exodus from Egypt, when God had enabled the Hebrews to escape slavery, the Passover Festival was established, so that the people could remember what God had done for them.

In Joshua 5 we read that the Israelites kept the Passover while they were camped at Gilgal. (v. 10) And to this day, Jews celebrate the Feast of Passover.

Joshua 5:1 says, “When all the kings heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan, their heart melted, neither was their spirit in them any more.” The battle was already partially won before a single blow had been struck because of the reputation and character of Israel’s God. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that the purposes of God may be deferred, but not defeated. This is the eternal fact of history. We come upon it centuries later in another story of a stone. After the crucifixion, Pilate said, “Make it sure as you can.” So they doubled the guard, rolled a heavy stone over the grave, and placed upon it the imposing seal of the emperor. But Easter revealed that the stone had been moved from the tomb and Jesus was raised from the dead—not defeated, but victorious.

The story from Joshua reminds us of other efforts made to memorialize accomplishments. In Rome there are the famous arches erected to honor her statesmen and generals. In Paris there is the Arc de Triomphe to memorialize the bravery of the French soldier on various battlefields. In Washington, D. C., there are monuments to Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln; to soldiers who fought in the First and Second World Wars , Korea, and Viet Nam. In Anderson County there is the Veterans Monument and marker near McGee Road. And of course, thanks to Keith Wentzky, we have the flags placed in our church cemetery each year at Memorial Day. And thanks to LeNelle Chastain, the names of our veterans are listed each year on the insert in our bulletin.

In the Bible the people of God are called to remember. To remember God’s goodness, his promises kept, his steadfast love so deep and wide. In Deuteronomy they are told to tie God’s commands on their wrists and put them on their doorposts, lest they forget. For we are

very good at forgetting. And forgetfulness is the cause of all kinds of trouble—in a marriage, in a church, in a country.

God led his people across the Jordan, even, we learn in chapter 3, at a time when the river was flooding from spring rains. We too have our rivers to cross, and sometimes we wonder how will we make it to the other side. I think of the 1745 hymn by William Williams, “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”:

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy pow’rful hand.
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me till I want no more;
Feed me till I want no more.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell’s Destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee;
I will ever give to Thee.

God leads his people across the river, when there seems to be no possible way. Just as God leads us through the darkest valleys, even the valley of the shadow of death. So that we might declare with the Psalmist:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (121:1)

You may have heard of the patriotic organization, No Greater Love. They take their name from John 15:13: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” This group asks Americans to pause at 3 p.m. on Memorial Day, wherever we are, to

honor those who have died for our freedom throughout history, and to commit themselves to living every day a life that honors America's fallen heroes.

For more than 50 years, groups have joined with No Greater Love to honor our fallen, our veterans, and their families, and have participated in the National Moment of Remembrance—for those who gave the last ounce of courage. This is a moment of love—a love for those we honor and their families and a love of God and country. Lest we forget.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.