

“Twelve Stones”
May 24, 2020

Joshua 4:1-9

An older couple were having a few problems remembering things, so they decided to go together to their doctor to ask some advice. When they arrived at the doctor's office, they explained to the doctor how they had been forgetting from time to time. The doctor proceeded to ask a few questions and do a couple of quick tests. Everything looked okay, according to the doctor, but as the couple left the appointment, the doctor offered a piece of advice.

“You might want to start writing things down more often. Make notes to yourself to help you remember.”

Well, later that evening while the couple was watching tv together, the husband got up from his chair and his wife asked, “Where are you going?”

“To the kitchen,” he replied.

“It would be great if you could get me a bowl of ice cream,” she asked with a smile on her face. “No problem, sweetheart,” he responded.

A couple of seconds later, the wife called out to her husband. “Don't you think you should write this down so you can remember it? You know, like the doctor said we should.”

He called back, “don't worry, I'm pretty sure I can remember.”

“If you don't mind, then, I would love it if maybe you could put a few strawberries on top of my ice cream,” she continued. “You might want to go ahead and write that down because I think you'll forget.”

“I got this,” the husband responded, “you want a bowl of ice cream with some strawberries on top.”

“Oh, and while you're in the kitchen, honey, getting my bowl of ice cream, maybe you could finish it off with a spoonful of whip cream on top of the strawberries. That would make it perfect. You sure you don't need to write this down?”

At this point, the husband was getting a little irritated. So he snapped back at his wife, with a slightly annoyed tone in his voice. “I don't need to write anything down. Just sit tight and I'll be back in a few minutes.”

About twenty minutes later, the husband returned from the kitchen and handed his wife a plate of bacon and eggs.

The wife stared down at the plate for a couple of moments. Then she looked up at her husband. “I knew you were gonna mess this up,” she shook her head, now slightly irritated herself. “You forgot my toast...”

We all forget things from time to time. We forget where we put our keys, our homework, our phones, our wallet, our glasses. We forget appointments and directions. We forget names and dates. But when we’re not forgetting, being able to remember things, whether they happened recently or long time ago, is one of the great gifts God gives us.

What’s more, memories are not only a gift, they are also practical. If we didn’t remember certain important facts, we would be in trouble for sure. If we couldn’t remember, for example, that a “red light” means “stop”, we’d have a serious problem. Or if we didn’t remember a special birthday or an anniversary, we’d have to deal with the disappointment or the wrath of the person we were supposed to celebrate.

Memories are gifts and they are practical. Memories also endure. Centuries ago, on the banks of the Jordan River, Joshua, the great Hebrew leader who took over for Moses when Moses died on the threshold of the Promised Land, built an enduring memorial.

Today’s story from Scripture is not particularly familiar. Certainly not as familiar as the New Testament story of Jesus being baptized in the same Jordan River. But in the Fourth Chapter of the book in the Bible that bears his name, Joshua led the entire nation of Israel over the Jordan. It was a huge procession of people crossing from one riverbank to the other, highlighted by the high priests who were responsible for carrying the holy Ark of the Covenant.

There were twelve high priests, each one representing one of the twelve ancient tribes of Israel. And as they were crossing the Jordan River, Joshua gave the high priests a command. “When you cross the river,” Joshua ordered, “each of you must pick up one large stone from the river and carry it to the other side.”

The whole scene was dramatic to behold. Each of the twelve priests holding on tightly to the sacred Ark of the Covenant, a wooden chest covered in gold which bore the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The priests stopped every few feet so they could bend down one by one in the river bed and pick up a stone. Until finally all twelve priests emerged from the river and climbed the bank on the far side, bearing the Ark of the Covenant on one shoulder and a large stone on the other.

At Joshua’s direction, the high priests took their large stones and built a monument on the shore of the Jordan River. That stone monument was a way of commemorating the safe crossing of the entire Hebrew nation. And that stone monument was a way of honoring God’s goodness and God’s deliverance along their journey.

Joshua went on to instruct his people that the stone memorial would remind future generations of the day the “waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord.” Joshua knew the human tendency we have to forget God’s goodness and God’s provision. If we don’t find a way to memorialize critical events, we begin to forget what happened and how we felt at the time it happened. Memorials or markers or monuments...in the Bible they are a sign of God’s timeless faithfulness.

At the very end of this morning’s Scripture lesson, however, something happened that a reader could easily skip over. Especially since the verse is actually written in parentheses. In the ninth verse of the Fourth chapter of Joshua, it reads, “Joshua set twelve stones *in the middle of the Jordan*, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.”

That’s a little odd, isn’t it? The fact that Joshua himself set down twelve stones when he could easily have asked someone else to set the stones down for him is odd enough. But the fact that he set twelve stones down in the bottom of a riverbed where water would cover over them...where no one would see them and nobody aside from Joshua would know they were there. That’s really odd...why would Joshua do that...?

I think Joshua put twelve stones in the river so that he himself would remember. Joshua commanded the high priests to carry twelve stones out of the river and set up a monument so the people would remember. By doing so, he created a public memorial. At the same time, Joshua set twelve stones in the middle of the river so that he would remember. Thereby creating a personal memorial.

We need to be able to remember on both a public and a personal level. And that’s what Memorial Day is all about. On Memorial Day we remember collectively as a people and a nation our ancestors who gave their lives on behalf of this country. With monuments and markers and memorials, we honor the men and women who have sacrificed their own lives in an effort to uphold the freedom we hold near and dear.

In many ways, our public remembering this Memorial Day 2020 is even more important than usual. In the midst of the grief and struggle of this pandemic, we remember the trials of those who came before us. We remember the perseverance and the resilience of past generations. We honor those who lost their lives. And we honor the goodness of God, who promises to deliver God’s people through hardship to a new day

Simultaneously, Memorial Day is a day for personal remembering. We may not know someone in our lives or in our family history who died in wartime. Still, Memorial Day is a personal holiday. A day when you and I give thanks for those who suffered and sacrificed to carry this nation thus far on the way.

Memorial Day is a good day for each of us to envision our own version of Joshua’s twelve stones in the riverbed. Twelve stones no one else might see or understand. Yet they serve as private reminders for you and for me that we can survive

and press on, in spite of any obstacles, because the ones who came before us charted a path for us to follow. And because God's goodness endures forever...

Picture twelve stones and remember well then, tomorrow and beyond. Amen.