

“YOU HAVE NOT PASSED THIS WAY BEFORE”

IV. “Stones of Remembrance”

1-27-08
Ken Peterson

Joshua 4

TEXT: *What do these stones mean?* (4:6)

INTRODUCTION

One of the projects Polly and I started in our week of vacation after Christmas was taking our old trays of 35 mm. slides from over 25 years from the pre-digital era and scanning them into the computer to put on CDs. Inspired by Maxine Wood whose done this with all their old slides, we bought a scanner and began the project. We hadn't looked at most of these slides for years. It is just too much hassle to get out the projector and screen and look at them. In fact, when we decided to do this, we thought of previewing them on screen and couldn't even find our screen. It is somewhere in the house or garage, but.... We wanted these slides more accessible and more permanently preserved— some were already losing some of their color. It has been a bit tedious, but also interesting, seeing pictures we haven't seen for many years. And, it seems like I'm often saying, “Wow! I can't believe I was ever that thin!”

We have what we call “memorable events,” don't we? They include special events: birth, weddings, trips, graduations, and other celebrations. We know they are important and we don't want to forget them. We want to be able to come back through the gift of memory and relive that event. And one way of preserving those to help us remember is through photography. When we are on trips, we sometimes buy things to remind us of that special time— hence the huge souvenir industry with gift shops at “all the sites.” We pick up cups, hats, t-shirts, and trinkets naming the place or event. Also, there are things someone special has given us that remind us of that person each time we see it or use it.

God also makes a big deal out of remembering. It is important to our spiritual well-being to remember. Forgetting what God has done is often seen as one of the causes of sin and rebellion against Him. Admonitions to not forget fill the book of Deuteronomy— Moses' final sermons before the children of Israel go into the promised land. Now, as they prepare to conquer the land God has given them, God gives careful instruction in building a monument to serve as a reminder of this event. The detail He gives here not only accentuates the importance of what God is asking, but lays down some spiritual principles that we also need to heed.

MEMORY ROCKS

Israel was divided into twelve tribes, one from each of the sons of Jacob. To form this memorial, God wants all of Israel— each of the twelve tribes to be included. So, one man from each tribe is appointed to select a rock from the middle of the miraculously dried-up river, from where the priests stood bearing the Ark of the Covenant, symbolic of the presence of God. These are rocks from the exact center of the miracle— right from where God was working in mighty power. These twelve men, each bearing a river rock, carry them to the other side where,

Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day. (Josh 4:9)

I don't know if they wrote their tribe's names on the stones— but there was one for each: Simeon, Reuben, Gad, Benjamin, Judah, etc. Everyone was represented. Everyone was in the picture. They were there. Their feet had crossed over these very stones on dry ground.

As I picture them carrying these stones up out of the river bed, I recall our freshman initiation in high school. Like many of our western towns (including Okanogan), we had the first letter of our high school, Flathead (named after the local Indian tribe), etched in whitewashed stones high up a hill overlooking the town. Freshman initiation involved being bused out to the base of the hill and being ordered to find a rock the size of your head, and carry it up the hill to be added to the "F." And then all the rocks were all given a fresh coat of whitewash. It was a more major climb than any of us had anticipated, mercilessly herded along by upper class men. But there was also this— ever after, you felt a sense of ownership each time you looked up at that hill with the white "F." You could say to yourself, "I was there. It's a tough climb, especially with a rock the size of your head. But my rock is there. I am a part of that display everyone looks at."

Many times in the Old Testament, altars were built to mark those special God-encounters. Abraham built several. I especially like what Jacob says when he set-up a stone memorial, after his special dream at Bethel. Remember he is fleeing from the anger of this brother Esau after stealing Esau's blessing. In Gen 28:16-18, we read:

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

Jacob's exclamation, "*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven,*" conveys the motivation for our memory rocks. We need to have memory aids of those places where we encounter God in an especially meaningful way— where, as John W. Peterson's song says, where "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul."

I hope your memory is well-stocked with such encounters with the living God. Perhaps you're remembering your salvation, a baptism in the Holy Spirit, a time of relinquishment, peace brought in the midst of great turmoil and trouble, hearing a special Word from the Lord you needed, or other times of spectacular, transforming encounters with the Lord. One of the problems we always face after those times is keeping them fresh in our memories. We know we don't want to slip back into the "before." We want to keep going, keep applying the principles and truths learned. We want to keep our hearts soft, pliable, surrendered to God. We want to serve Him and Him alone all our days, from that day forward. But we drift and let go and, while we may keep the memory in our minds, the disposition of our heart is no longer as it was.

Here's a rock that Polly and I have kept from Marble, Colorado. Back in the late-1980's, I hit a major crisis of burn-out. It was a very painful, difficult time for both of us dealing with some of the root issues involved. During that time, we able to spend two weeks at Marble Retreat Center

in Colorado run by a Christian psychiatrist and his wife for clergy couples in crises like ours. They only took five couples at a time. It was a wonderful time of healing for us and we didn't want to ever return to our old emotionally unhealthy ways. We wanted to live in the new Spirit-controlled balance we were learning and deeper way of appreciating each other. We brought back this piece of marble to remind us and call us back. Marble, Colorado is a place where lots of marble has been quarried, so there are plenty of small pieces of marble strewn about. This piece of marble is always in my study to remind me— to call me back to principles and balance we learned in those two weeks.

Journaling is another way Christians have found effective in preserving memories and details of God's actions in their lives. The journals of many famous Christians like George Fox and John Wesley have been a huge blessing to countless other believers. But, your experiences with God are also important for you to remember, even if shared with no one else. The sharp details quickly fade from memory, so it helps to keep a written account.

Joe Miller did a form of journaling this last Christmas regarding his son, Gabe's new job, which is one of those amazing God-events. Here's a few pictures from the book he made that he has given to the church library, along with the story:

- Carol Miller chose Isaiah 40:31 as a memory verse for Gabriel from his earliest years. It became his life-verse, because he was ALWAYS interested in flying:

*but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.* (Isa 40:31)

- Most of Gabe's toys had wings
- After the Marine Corps he went to work for Galvin Aviation at Boeing Field in Seattle working his way up to being an instructor pilot.
- Galvin Aviation honored him with a full page ad in "Professional Pilot" pilot magazine.
- Not long after, Regency Air, a charter company in California contacted Gabe for an interview. He checked out their web site, and every one of their web pages has "Isaiah 40:31 printed in the upper right hand corner. When he was asked in the first interview if he knew what that was, his response was, "Of course, and he recited it to them. It is my mother's life-verse for me." They told him he was the only person they ever interviewed for a job that knew what Isaiah 40:31 meant. They were impressed and hired him. Regency Air is, as you would expect, is owned by Christians.
- Now, Gabe flies a business jet for Regency, a charter company often used by celebrities in the L.A. area.

Isn't that amazing, how a Bible verse comes full-circle over the years? Did God give that verse to Carol for little Gabriel? Did God know that twenty-some years later he'd be flying for a company that used that very verse as part of their definition of their purpose?

There are many other ways spiritually-significant memories are preserved for us. Sometimes

maybe it is a song that triggers a special memory because in and through that song, God moved in your heart in a special way. On those 5th Sunday hymn sings we have, I'd love to have the time and format to be able to hear stories behind why that is a favorite hymn or chorus. In those, I know we'd hear stories of salvation, comfort, guidance, renewal, and other marvelous moves of God in our midst.

HUMILITY

Remembering is important to keep us humble before God. Deut 8:11-14 and 17-18 summarizes this, just weeks before this crossing:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery....

You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth....

When we forget, it is a serious breach of our relationship with God. Pride enters into our hearts and we begin to take credit for what really has been given to us. We all stand on the shoulders of others. Far more is given to us in this life than we ever earn on our own. Consider our nation and all those who gave their lives for what we have. Did you create yourself? Did you raise yourself? No, all of us were born with marvelous capabilities that were given to us by our parents. And, when a child rebels against his or her parents, don't the parents inwardly feel the hurt, asking themselves, "Don't they remember all we've done for them— how we've sacrificed for them?" We all have a heavenly Father as well, who grieves for us when we rebel against His ways. Don't ever forget that He gave His very life to save us from our sin and its subsequent eternal destruction.

Jesus, in that last night with His disciples gave them a memorial to remember what God has done on the cross for us. He established the Lord's Supper, directing them to keep this, to "*Do this in remembrance of me...*" (Lk. 22:19). Each time we come to communion should be a humbling of our hearts, confessing our sins, and receiving His grace in forgiveness. He is our rightful Lord, and we surrender our all to Him. He is the vine, we are only branches (Jn. 15)— we must continually stay connected to Him, abiding in Him even as the bread and grape juice enter our bodies and become a part of us. We must never stray far from this baseline. We need constant reminding lest we take charge and begin running our lives again.

TEACHING

Finally, this memorial is so that their children will ask, *What do these stones mean?* (4:6). Then, they will pass on the story. But not just the event, but also the meaning of the event expounded in vs. 24. Tell them why God did this.

He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God. (Josh 4:24)

Israel is to be a witness to *all the peoples of the earth*. Through Israel (and now us) all people are to come to know the power of God and His works on behalf of those who follow Him. Also, it is so our own hearts will *always fear the Lord your God*— that is, walk in humble reverence and awe, obeying Him.

Washington D.C. is full of memorials that are meant to raise the question, *What do these stones mean?* They remind us of those on whose shoulders we all stand. The hugeness and grandeur humble us and make us feel properly insignificant. We are all deeply indebted to those who have gone before us. It is wonderful, if we are able, to take our children to such places and tell them the stories.

The church also needs to keep alive this sense of history. We tell the stories to our children here of how God has worked with fallen humanity from the beginning. We explain the whys of communion, baptism, and the proclamation of the Word of God. Why do we give money? Why do we sing the songs we sing? Etc., etc.

And, in church buildings there are often things that remind us of our local history. In the Presbyterian Church in Whitefish, Montana where I was a pastor, a couple of the stained glass windows bore the inscription, “given by the Japanese.” That often raised questions from people new to the church and gave me the opportunity to tell the story. Whitefish is a railroad town, and in the early part of the 20th century, in the building of railroads there was a significant population of Japanese doing the heavy manual labor, including gandy dancers. There was considerable prejudice in those days toward these workers of Oriental descent. The Presbyterian Church made a point of reaching out to them and inviting them in. They held special classes for them, teaching them English. When the present structure was built in the 1920's, the Japanese remembered and raised money among themselves for a couple of stained glass windows. It is a wonderful story to be remembered.

And, be sure you are telling your own story of God’s saving acts, passing it on to your children, grandchildren and anyone else who will listen. Make sure they know God is alive in your life. He answers prayer, He intervenes in miraculous ways, He watches over us, and His love, grace, and mercy are never ending. Tell the story of your salvation. Tell how the Holy Spirit has at various times revived your heart. Tell of the battles you’ve fought— both the victories and defeats. Let them know that God is real to you.

CONCLUSION

For many years, every Friday evening, old Ed would show up on a Florida pier just as the sun was starting to dip into the ocean. Clutched in his bony hand was a bucket of shrimp. He’d walk to the end of the pier and soon dozens of seagulls enveloped him. As Ed tossed the shrimp out into the air for the seagulls to grab, he’d smile and say, “Thank you, thank you.” Sometimes a gull perched on his old weather-beaten military hat. To the onlooker, Ed might seem like “a

funny old duck” who was losing it. But his name is Eddie Rickenbacker, the famous W.W. I flying ace. He was pressed back into service in W.W. II. His B-17 bomber went down on a mission across the Pacific, with all eight members of the crew surviving the crash landing in the ocean. They floated for days in their little life raft. They fought the sun and sharks. The eighth day, their rations ran out– no more food or water. No one knew where they were. They needed a miracle.

That afternoon, they held a simple devotional service, crying out to God for a miracle. Then, as time dragged on, and relentless sun beat down, they tried to nap. Eddie leaned back against the side of the raft, pulling his military cap over his eyes, listening to the slap of the waves against the raft. Suddenly, Eddie felt a seagull light on his hat. Eddie sat perfectly still, contemplating his next move. Then, with a flash of his hands and a squawk from the gull, Eddie grabbed it and wrung its neck. After tearing the feathers off, the starving crew made a tiny meal out of it. But, more important, they used the innards for bait and finally began catching fish which gave them more food and bait. The cycle continued until they were rescued after three weeks surviving in the life raft.

Eddie Rickenbacker went on to be president of Eastern Airlines and chairman of the board through many of the formative days of commercial aviation. But Friday nights, until his death, he maintained this ritual of memory– feeding the seagulls and reflecting on the miracle that saved his life.

There is a wonderful parallel here, as every Sunday we gather to worship. It puts us back in touch with the saving acts of God. It keeps us humble and grateful. It keeps us from straying from the essential truths of our eternal salvation.