

“Memory Markers”
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
November 5, 2023
Parts of Joshua 3 and 4
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Once again, standing gathered on the edge of an impossible river, or sea, to cross, there is no way through. Joshua and the people’s vision for the future is blocked by a body of water about the same width as the Potomac River we might not even glance down at as we drive over, on the American Legion bridge, or the Chain Bridge. If you have watched 1833, the Yellowstone Prequel, episode 4 involves a river crossing of water so low that coaches, horses and cattle can cross it at the exact right place and time, and when things do not go *exactly right* the episode shows just how terrifying and destructive moving rivers that are blocking your way can be. It gives new meaning to the comforting words of Psalm 23 that describe the Lord leading us beside *still* waters.

These waters in front of Joshua and the people are not still, they are overflowing their banks at harvesttime, uncrossable, unpassable, until verse 13: “the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, come to rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.” Vivid details we are meant to notice, especially as they intentionally recall other moments of scripture.

Not just any part of the foot, but the soles of the feet, come to rest. In Genesis, in the story of Noah’s ark, the dove first sent out can find no rest for the soles of its feet. In Deuteronomy 28, a consequence of not obeying God is that the people will find no rest for the soles of their feet. Rest in all these verses is from the Hebrew word *nuach*, which Pastor Layne preached about in her Sabbath sermon on Leviticus, how it means to dwell or settle in. The kind of rest that can come no matter the context, circumstance or situation, like standing in the middle of a river while the waters that have been cut off are standing in a single heap.

The Hebrew phrase, standing safely below a heap of water, is used also in Exodus and Psalms that retell the Red Sea crossing, the Jordan River moments, safe passage through a standing *heap* of water. All the English idioms I could think of involving the word heap, bottom of the heap, laying in a heap, being in a heap of trouble, a teacher heaping on homework, or this biblical gem, “to heap coals on someone’s head”, none of them are good.

A standing heap of water highlights how precarious this moment is, how miraculous the momentary rest, for the sole of the foot, is within it and how miraculous finding a created way

through to the other side will be. The kind of moment that gets seared into the memory, that is talked about for the rest of one's lifetime. How all signs pointed to at best a bleak future and at worst total devastation, but it ended up otherwise. The kind of event that would forever alter the participant. People who were there would surely talk about, tell their kids.

Yet, the Lord, through Joshua, commands a specific memory marker for one singular purpose. So that if the story ever stops being told, and future children don't learn it by heart at the soles of the feet of their elders, they will recall the memory by prompts from children doing what children do. They *notice*, in this case - noticing a big pile of 12 stones – these stones were so big that the representatives of the 12 tribes had to carry them on their shoulders. Hard to miss. And they ask, as kids will do, *why?* Or as the scripture elaborates on the why, “what do these stones mean to you?”

That this may be a sign unto them, sign also translated miracle, of God's presence, of rest and safety in the heap. Telling the story when your children ask in time to come, when the community has started to forget, but they need to remember about this one time when God's being with us was so clear, where it made a whole heap of difference. And that time, a heap in a good way.

The bible is full of humans wanting to mark, often with rocks, physical memorials, or by writing it down, their clear experiences of God's presence in a way that made a heap of difference in their lives. The only reason we have any of these stories, or scripture at all, is because the people who wrote them were absolutely convinced that God was real, and involved in their lives, and God's miraculous presence in their lives was a story worth telling and remembering however they could.

There was an urgency in this response, part desire to share it with their community and future generations, who ask what do these *mean* to you? Present tense, not past. And part desire to hold onto the intensity of moments when God was so vividly, savingly present. A story makes the God who was present in the past once again present in the present.

You can build an entire life of faith around one moment when you were so sure that God was the only reason the sole of your foot found a resting place and you ended up on the other side of something you thought would destroy you. The candles on the retable remind us that some of those resting places and ways through are God's lighting the way in and through the dark valley of death.

Why the writer and theologian Kate Bowler writes that “God sometimes gives us these moments of supernatural closeness and it is often directly correlated with our times of greatest suffering.” <https://www.ttf.org/portfolios/online-conversation-hope-heartbreak-and-meaning-with-kate-bowler/> Ever present help in times of trouble.

God's real, miraculous presence, supernatural closeness, that overwhelms any intellectual doubts, any hard questions that challenge why you believe or go to church from skeptical friends or family. "I can't explain it," we might say, and some of you have said in stories you've shared with me, "but when I needed it most, when I was the most empty or broken or brokenhearted or devastated, there was all of a sudden enough, or more than I thought I had, or a sense that I wasn't alone, or a lessening of the pain, a pilot light in the dark place, a steadier step for the sole of my foot, there was rest." When the realm of this world, our limited reality in it, and the realm of the kingdom of mercy and love clearly intersected.

No wonder people want to set that kind of moment in stone. Even if life-altering clear moments of God's presence are ultimately unforgettable, our desire to orient our lives around the clarity of priorities those moments provide can fade. The Israelites in future generations will find themselves living their communal lives in a way that doesn't reflect the intensity of their past experience with God, like the character Buddy in Jane Smiley's novel *Horse Heaven*, who has become a somewhat ruthless horse trainer, and says to his wife through tears, "When the Lord came into me, it was such a good feeling, I thought well, I can do anything because of this feeling, but then there was all this stuff to do, and to think about, and I don't remember the feeling all that well." (As described here, [Lauren F. Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis* \(New York: HarperCollins, 2012\) ix-xi](#))

Buddy would resonate with St. Augustine's prayer, "Lord all I have discovered about you, I have done so by remembering." (Article by Richard Lischer, *Writing the Christian Life*, Christian Century August 2015)

Which is why we follow a Lord who gives us regular times to remember, whose last command before he was betrayed, arrested and killed was that we would remember. Remember with ritual, doing these things, in remembrance of the greatest thing that was done for us – that the death of Jesus on the cross was not the end of the story. A death that shattered known reality by breaking all prior understanding of cause and effect, action and outcome. when the realm of this world, our limited reality in it, and the realm of the kingdom of mercy and love intersected and stuck that way, in the forever defeat of the forces of death and the powers that drain life for the living. So that we can remember or experience anew, miraculous saving, supernatural closeness, pilot lights, steady steps, rest for the soles of the feet. No matter what heaps of grief or loss or challenge or disappointment, or blocked paths threaten to overwhelm.

You can build an entire life of faith around one moment when you were so sure that God was the only reason the waters parted in a heap, but only if you remember it, regularly make it present, what does that moment mean to you still? Even though there is all this stuff to do, so many other things to think about.

Which is why we do this together at this table. The stones of the Israelites were for the community's memory. Remember saints who have gone before. Share our history as a congregation. Tell our own *God was with me in a heap* stories to each other. What signs of God's miraculous presence have you seen? Have we seen? How many of the stories of this church, in its 175 plus years, do we remember, can we tell of the miraculous crossings, saving moments, that we mark in history books and pamphlets, wooden crosses on our lawn, tapestries, quilts, grave markers, candles? What did they first mean to you, to us? What do they mean to us now?

Remember God's real presence, in your life and our lives together, every time you come to the memory marker of this table, joining the Communion of the Saints, in communion, with all the saints, then, now and forevermore. Thanks be to God.