WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?

Living Out of Our History & Into His Hope

Joshua 4:1-24; 1 Peter 2:4-10

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As many of you know, I was raised in the Methodist Church (in Providence), but early in our marriage (50 years!) felt led of the Lord to join the Christian Reformed Church, one of the denominations in the Presbyterian and Reformed families of churches. Our church would celebrate both the "Old Year" passing and start the "New Year" with worship. Preparing for this morning, anticipating the Old-to-New Year transition, it seemed right to mark the event this morning.

Old Year's is not simply "New Year's Eve." Rather, it's a time to stop and look at where we are, where we've come from and how we got here, as well as looking forward to what our future holds. As has been said by many, we don't know what the future holds but we know Who holds the future. And Old Year's is not about nostalgia; it's about examining God's relation to us in and through His Son, Whose Incarnation we just celebrated.

The world might sing "Auld Lang Syne," that Scottish folk song, which in the Scots dialect means, "Old long since." More than "the good old days," for in all honesty they were not all good days this past year; it should be an honest look at all we've experienced in 2019 and how God has seen us through.

Today's lesson from Joshua concerns Israel's crossing the Jordan into the promised land. More than a simple journey from one place to another, this marks their re-consecration as the people of God, their deliverance from bondage and wandering through the desert to their new home with God as their King. They're to mark the event with simple stone markers known as 'cairns' in Scotland. Cairns are silent teachers of our life's journey with God, helping us to life *out of* our history and *into* His hope. We all might have 'cairns' or at least some such markers. Indeed, the idea for this message came from the building materials of this church, made of thousands of stones, a building I've long admired as we walked the Canal.

So I put the question to you, worshipers in this great stone building that houses Swift Memorial Church, **what do these stones mean?**

The stones in every cairn are witnesses to our history. *Our stones remind us of all the ways God has proved Himself, as He did for the people of Israel.* I have pictures on my laptop of cairns but my favorite is of the cairn atop the highest point on the Isle of Iona, off the west coast of the Isle of Mull, off the west coast of the Scottish Highlands. People who hike the little mountain are invited to take a stone from the bottom up the 'mountain' and add it to the cairn. You can barely see the cairn from the Iona Abbey below but it marks hundreds of pilgrimages to this holy place where St. Columba headquartered his missionary work to Scotland.

Joshua was instructed by the Lord to do something similar, to take 12 stones from the bottom of the Jordan River, once it had stopped flowing, and build a cairn of just those 12 stones on the far side, on the beachhead, as it were, of the promised land. This was a way to mark such events. They marked not only their journey but the miracle of crossing the river. As soon as the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant stepped into the water on the far side, the river stopped (3:15-16). They stepped out in faith, not *after* the way was clear but in faith God would stop the waters and clear the way.

At the end of Joshua (a fascinating story well worth reading), at the end of his life, he will call the people back to this reconsecration. God had brought them through their difficult history into the promised land. Now, could they live successfully there with the Lord? By way of reminder, they had the very cairn, made of stones from the bottom of the Jordan, to remind them of how God proved Himself.

This isn't a divinely mandated cairn to "the good old days" but to all the good God's done for their nation. He made them out of practically nothing and saved them from sure destruction time and again. Why? Because in Eden God had promised Eve a Savior, *the Savior*. He reiterated that promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and now through Joshua (Hebrew form of "Jesus") to the people crossing the Jordan. The history of the people of God has been a long pilgrimage to the promised land. Can they live there successfully? Let the cairn remind them how – by recalling that the Lord has always kept His promise and preserved His people.

God saving Israel is our history. The Messiah will be born to this people and become not only their Savior but ours. Joshua 4 isn't just a history lesson about ancient Israel, a morals story about the great dedication of God to His people and His people's dedication to God. This is our story too. Joshua 4 is *our* story, *our* history; because of this event we are all here worshiping at the end of 2019. God brought Israel into the promised land where Christ would be born and brought you and me to this moment where the Christ dwells in the midst of our worship, of this community of faith in Him, to again renew this covenant, just as we will next week with Lord's Supper. This is just as incredible a miracle as the Jordan crossing and our worship in this stone church is another testimony at our cairn. Somehow, if we're hearing the Good News of our saving God, God is at work saving us from death to eternal life.

Joshua called the people of Israel to remember they're God's people, a people God has kept covenant with throughout their history. Our history is God's history, as someone said, "History is 'His' story in our lives."

The stones not only witness to Israel's past with God but to the present, to what lies right before us. So *our stone markers should make us grateful for who we are in the Lord.* It's not just what God's done for us but what He's doing for us, in us, through us. Israel's poised on the Jordan threshold of a whole new life in the promise land.

The book of Judges tells us all didn't go perfectly but here they still are. History remembered not only helps us to prevent repeating the bad but causes us to be grateful and inspires us to the good. When you next partake of communion, pause to remember Who calls to His table and gives you the hunger to come. Realizing who and Whose we are inspires and nurtures us to live in Him today.

And if we get forgetful, well, the stones in each of our cairns serve as reminders of His great work for us and cause us to be grateful to Him, so grateful He's brought us here by faith and we want to show our gratitude. You know how it is. Someone hosts you to dinner and you want to show your gratitude by hosting them in return. Jesus says, "Come to my table for the meal of your life and then show your gratitude by serving the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick and all who need my lovingkindness through you!"

Gratitude is the antidote to grumbling and griping. We have the choice. Remember Israel grumbling to Moses and wanting to go back into slavery in Egypt? They didn't like the food God provided, manna! Thankfully, they didn't go back but that's our choice, gratitude or grumbling. Our stones, our cairns, our remembrance markers remind us to be grateful.

Our gratitude to God is for the grace given us to serve Him today. My wife has taught me that grace comes in daily portions. At the Jordan it was grace for Israel to recommit themselves to the God Who had just saved them. For us, it's the grace not only to make it

through life's transitions but to thrive in them. So, perhaps grace will see us through health challenges we may never fully recover from, if we recover at all, but in the pain and suffering we may find the Savior's Holy Spirit closer than ever. (I could tell you tales from so many hospital bedsides!) And, of course, it's the daily grace to keep living with and for Jesus despite life's obstacles.

All Joshua asks of Israel is commitment today, not forever, but today. I've done hundreds of weddings and nearly as many funerals, I suppose. Young couples promise their undying love and affection "till death do them part." At the other end of marriage, I've heard couples testify that what kept them so long married was the simple promise that today they were husband and wife; today they were married. When we've a proper perspective on God and ourselves then we know we're graced to serve Him today and these stones, our stones, become witnesses to ourselves of what's right in front of us to be and to do.

Finally, of course, **these stones are witness to what lies ahead of us.** *Cairns are meant to be God's silent call for renewed commitment.* In Joshua 4:19-24 I can almost hear the urgency in Joshua's voice. As we celebrate another transition of the years, if we're honest, we share his urgency for we wonder whether we can keep our commitments. We live in unsettling times. So did Israel. At the end of his book Joshua will again demand of the people commitment. His work is done. His life is at the end. So he demands of the people, "Choose this day Whom you will serve." He knew how fickle the human heart can be. Let the stones bear witness we've a future before us if we'll choose to serve the Lord, Jesus Christ. It's an urgent plea for there's no going back.

The world needs to know the story of our stones (Joshua 4:20-24). Parents and adult followers of Jesus need to tell the children so they'll know and not forget, how God delivered the people of Israel and brought them to the promised land. And we have a greater story to tell, how His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ has brought us into His promised land, not across the river but through His blood shed for our sins, shed to restore us to one another and to our God. This is our future: "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."

Conclusion: *Where are our stones and what do they mean?* I've got one more thought on stones. Peter wrote (1 Peter 2:4,5): "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." It isn't enough to worship *in* this beautiful stone building; we are to *become living stones*, the new temple of God. And I'll tell you one thing more, if you can handle this truth. You already *are!*

One more thing: this is by way of farewell. In several weeks I will be taking a position at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. We're sad to be going but it was the offer of another adventure in Christ we couldn't refuse. We're saddest of all to leave Amy and Derek but know that they have a future here with you all for we've seen them become part of this cairn called Swift Memorial. Just remember how you all got here, be grateful for what you are and have here, and especially live in the hope of all that is to come here.