

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, ² “Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³ and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.”

⁴ So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵ and said to them, “Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ⁷ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”

⁸ So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. ⁹ 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. (Joshua 4:1-9)

What do These Stones Mean?

A long time ago, I saw a commercial in which a young woman said, “My job requires me to be the smartest person in the world. I’m a kindergarten teacher.” It went on to show kids asking her all kinds of questions: why is the sky blue? Why do bees make noise? And on and on. I don’t even remember what the point of the commercial was, but I do remember being amused by it. It’s funny because it’s true. Kids ask questions. Little kids will sometimes start the next question before you finish answering the first one. Before we had kids I used to see parents struggling to answer those questions. I always thought they could do a better job. Then we had kids of our own. When they’re little and they ask you all those random questions, you realize just how exhausting it is to try to give good answers. There’s always another one coming. Well, today, the Lord points to those questions that children ask to make a point. He pictures generations of Jewish children walking past an odd pile of stones and asking about them. In the answer God told them to give, he tells us about the depths of his love for us. It’s worthwhile for us today to picture that pile of stones from the middle of a river and then ask, **what do these stones mean?**

I.

To answer that question, you have to know where we are in the history of God’s people. You all know that God sent Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. When Pharaoh refused to let them go, God struck them with ten horrible plagues. He led the people to the shores of the Red Sea and when Pharaoh’s army pursued, he divided the sea and the people went through on dry land. When Pharaoh’s army followed, he closed the waters again and drowned them all. From there he led them to Mt. Sinai where he gave them his covenant. All that was forty years in the past. A whole generation had spent those years wandering in the desert because they refused to enter the Promised Land when Moses brought them there from Mt. Sinai. After forty years of grumbling and cleansing, Moses once again brought them to the edge of the Promised Land. But then God called him home to heaven. And he called Joshua to take his place. That’s where we are today.

At God’s command, Joshua led the people across the River Jordan and into the Promised Land. He ordered the priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the river. Now, I’ve never seen the Jordan River, but on a map at least, it looks like a pretty good sized river. At this moment, it was at flood stage. You could not swim or wade across. But Joshua told those priests to march right out into the river. When they did, the water stopped flowing. Upstream, it “piled up” while downstream it flowed away so the entire nation crossed safely. Then God told Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe of Israel. He had them go out to where the priests were standing in the middle of the riverbed and collect stones. Not little pebbles like kids play with. Joshua told them to lift these rocks up onto their shoulders, so good sized rocks. They carried this twelve large stones to their camp for the night and piled them there.

God said, **“In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the**

Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” The stones reminded the people of what happened there that day. Why did that matter? We can’t help but see the similarity with Moses bringing the people across the Red Sea. The parting of the Red Sea was one of the greatest miracles of all time and when God was preparing Joshua to do this, he told him, **“Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.”** God was telling the people that Joshua was his servant just as much as Moses had been.

God was placing his seal of approval on Joshua and on the work he was about to do. Joshua was about to lead Israel into a series of brutal wars to conquer the Promised Land. God was saying that this conquest wasn’t Joshua’s idea. It was God’s idea. Why does that matter? Because the conquest of the land was a key piece of God’s plan. God was fitting Joshua into the progression of events that began when he confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He was plugging him into his place in the events from Noah to Abraham to Joseph to Moses. And most of all, he was plugging him into his place in the events that led up to Christ.

In the Garden of Eden, God cursed Adam and Eve and all their descendants with death and hell because of their sin – which is also our sin. We all die because they sinned and because we sin. But God also promised a Savior who would free us from death and hell, who would conquer the devil and restore us to God’s side. God repeated that promise, again and again throughout the Old Testament, adding more and more details so that the people could grow in their understanding. God told Abraham that through his seed all people on earth would be blessed. The Savior would be his descendant and God promised him that he would come in this very land that Joshua was about to conquer.

But Abraham died without owning a foot of land there. His son and his grandson and his great-grandsons lived as nomads wandering through that land, waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. Then they took their families down to Egypt for four hundred years. There God grew them into a nation so large that the Egyptians were terrified and they enslaved them. That mighty people Moses brought out of Egypt. That mighty people Joshua was bringing home so that God could keep his promise. God would add more and more details later. The Savior would come from the tribe of Judah, from the line of King David. He would be born in Bethlehem and live and die and rise again to set his people free from sin and death. His kingdom would spread over all the earth.

That was the plan that Joshua was working to fulfill 1400 years before Jesus was born. Now Joshua could never have put in motion all those events that would lead to the baby in the manger and the Savior on the cross all those centuries later. But God could. God did. Today, we see God underlining his plan for future generations because the conquest of the land was a key step to Christ. Those stones cried out and pointed to the love of God that ordered history all so that we would live.

We needed him to do that. That’s the real miracle here. God in heaven looked down and he saw sinners. He saw people like us who deserve nothing but death and hell. We modern Americans like to believe that there’s a little good in everybody. But that’s not what God sees. He sees all the sins that we hide even from ourselves. He sees all the times we’re selfish and dress it up like we’re really doing what’s best for everybody. He sees the messes we make of our lives and the hell that we deserve. And he loves us. From the moment sin entered this world, God acted to save us. God did all this so that Jesus would be born, so that Jesus would be perfect where we are not, so that Jesus would live a life without pride or self-deception, a life that deserved eternal life. God did all this so that Jesus would sacrifice that perfect life on the cross for us and for all people who will ever live. Jesus paid for all our sin, for all our messes, for all our pride and self-love. Jesus rose to tell us it’s all washed away and we will live with him forever. Those stones that Joshua’s men piled up were one way God said that. **What do these stones mean? They mean that God had a plan to save us.**

II.

God wants us to know that plan. It wasn’t enough that God stopped the flow of the river so the nation could cross. God had Joshua collect these stones that had probably lay beneath the water for generations. God had them piled in a place where children would see them. God wanted those children to ask, “What do these stones mean?” God gave their parents the answer: **“Tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD.”** He told them, **“These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”**

We Americans like memorials. If you ever get the chance to walk around the National Mall in Washington D.C., do it. The famous memorials are impressive: the Washington Monument, the Lincoln

Memorial, the World War Two, Korean War and Vietnam War Memorials. If you wander a little farther you can see the Jefferson and FDR Memorials. But if you take some extra time and just wander around, you'll spot little, forgotten memorials. In fact, there's a government office that deals with old memorials in Washington and decides whether to repair them or remove them.

Why build a memorial? First and foremost, it's to remember, right? It honors whoever or whatever we're memorializing to be sure. But honor begins with memory. Those forgotten memorials just don't do their job anymore. But the famous ones call our attention to our history. If you take your children or your grandchildren to see them, you can read with them Lincoln's greatest speeches, you can explain why FDR is portrayed in a wheelchair, you can talk about the greatest words of Thomas Jefferson or the symbolism of the states on the World War II Memorial. Your children will remember and honor that history.

God wanted his people to remember how much he loved them and how many promises he had kept. Certainly, so that they and we would honor him, but also so that our faith would have something to cling to – a promise kept that pointed forward to more promises to be fulfilled. For fourteen centuries after Joshua lived, God pointed forward to Jesus. And every memorial he left along the way was a touchstone for them to remember and trust those promises.

Today, you can't go to Israel and find those memorial stones. Three and half thousand years of time have caused us to lose them. But here in the Word of God, they still stand as a witness to God's love and the way he keeps promises. God has given us New Testament memorials, too. He's given us the holy ministry. Every pastor and teacher he calls to tell us about Jesus reminds us that he promised that his church will not fail, that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Baptism is a memorial. Every time we baptize someone here in church, God reminds us and our children that God washed our sins away on the day we were baptized. The Lord's Supper is a memorial. When we receive the body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine, God comes to us personally and tells us that we are forgiven and as Paul says, in this way we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

But the greatest memorial of all is the word. The word is what makes the body and blood of Christ present in communion. The word is what gives the water of baptism its power to save. The word is what God sends every pastor and teacher to proclaim. The word is the very power of God. The word tells us that our Savior has come. That God moved heaven and earth to bring him to that manger in Bethlehem and that cross outside of Jerusalem and that God broke the law of death to bring him out of his tomb. The word tells us that he ascended into heaven to rule all things for our good. The word assures that we are forgiven no matter how guilty we feel. That word promises us that Christ will return for us. If we die first, then we will stand with him in heaven and return with him. But he will return and call us from the grave and sweep all sin and sorrow and pain from this world and we will live with him forever. God gave us that word, God gave our children that word, so that we would know and remember, so that we and our children would trust in him and be saved. Those stones that Joshua put up proclaimed that word, too. **What do these stones mean? They mean that God wants us to know his plan.**

Like a kindergarten teacher, every one of us is the smartest person on earth because we know the most important message there is to know. We know about Jesus. We know how much God loves us and what he has done for us. We know. Remember and rejoice in that love. Amen.