

Choosing a More Faithful Future 2022  
Joshua 4:1-8

Joshua 4:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: “Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’” Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.” The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there.

Almost 20 years ago, when our granddaughters were little girls,  
Kathy and I brought them to Washington DC to see the sights.  
I was pleased and delighted to be with them for their first visit,  
to answer their questions about the monuments and memorials  
by telling them stories that explain our nation's history.

By hearing and claiming those stories as their heritage  
my granddaughters began to appreciate and understand  
that our nation's history is really their history,  
and hopefully to aspire toward higher ideals & more worthy dreams.

We looked through the fence at the WW II memorial that day.  
It was still being built, but they could see the work in process.

I urged them to pay close attention and remember what they saw,  
because later, someday after the memorial has been completed,  
they may come back with their own children or grandchildren.

They would be able to tell about our nation's stories and hopeful vision,  
about seeing the memorial under construction,  
about the day that we were spending with them,  
and about my father who served in the Navy during WW II.

That is the point and purpose of monuments and memorials,  
to remember and be drawn into the stories and the history ---  
--- by those lessons and connections with the past.

**A memorial or symbol has meaning only if we know the story behind it.**

I'm reminded of when the Viet Nam Memorial was dedicated back in 1982.  
I happened to have business downtown that week,  
so I swung by to see it now that it was open to the public,  
and it was an unexpected and powerful experience.

Early on the simple design of the memorial had been controversial.

Critics complained that it was, "just a gash in the ground"  
that didn't speak in a meaningful way  
as a symbol to honor those who had served.

But when I got near the memorial  
the area was packed with veterans gathered together remembering...  
... some in tears, some in subdued silence and staring at names,  
while others shared stories and greeted former comrades  
they hadn't seen or spoken to since returning from the war.

In fact most of them, when they returned home,  
had never told anybody about what happened during the war  
and the stories of their experiences for years went untold.

But for some reason,  
when they got to the Viet Nam War Memorial, and they could see  
the reflection of themselves in the shiny black panels,  
and read the names of fallen comrades they had known—

- a lot of old memories and stories came flooding back to them...  
... and there was an amazing healing of old wounds  
as they remembered and retold their stories.

**That kind of story-telling can be a very powerful experience.**

Even today you may see small groups sharing their stories,  
telling young children about a loved one named on the wall.

**Something special comes with hearing a person share their story,  
for then the memorial takes on a powerful meaning and message,  
and becomes more relevant to us once we hear and know the stories.**

When the Israelites got to the banks of Jordan River  
after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness,  
as they were ready to cross over into the Promised Land...

... when the feet of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant  
stepped out into the water, the Jordan River suddenly parted,  
and there was dry ground between the separated waters ...  
**... a dry –safe place in the river for them to cross.**

Then God instructed Joshua to take up 12 stones from the river bed,  
and use them to build a memorial where they stopped that 1<sup>st</sup> night.

Those rounded rocks that'd been worn smooth by the flowing water  
would be noticeably out of place in the middle of the desert  
a full day's travel away from any river or body of water.

They would serve as a visible and constant reminder:

\* that God, had heard their cries in distant Egypt,  
\* that God, had sustained them through the wilderness,  
\* and that God had promised never to abandon them.

**\* Those rocks were souvenirs of hope and God's promise fulfilled.**

So for generations to come, when people, especially children saw it,  
they would wonder about the memorial and ask questions about it,  
"what are those rounded and smooth river rocks  
that memorial doing way out here in the desert?"

Then, the older generation, the people who had been around and knew

the story of coming through the wilderness to the Promised Land,  
would have the perfect opportunity to tell the story,  
and teach them about God's love & taking care of them. vs. 6

"when your children ask in time to come, what do those stones mean do you ? ...then you shall tell them ...  
so these stones shall be a memorial forever"

That stone memorial in the desert served two major purposes.

1<sup>st</sup>, **a constant reminder** of God's goodness, grace and promises,  
and 2<sup>nd</sup>, **to help pass on** that truth, that knowledge of God  
and God's commandments down through the generations.

As a young child, as we were driving home from church one Sunday,  
I remember being curious and asking questions about Communion.  
So my parents explained what the symbols and words meant,  
teaching me about the Last Supper & the sacrifice of Jesus  
and of course, the joy & wonder of Easter resurrection.

And so Communion was a teaching tool that prompted my questions,  
which lead to telling me the stories about Jesus which in time,  
lead to my receiving and trusting Christ my Savior, by faith.

**So what are the stories and experiences of faith from this last year  
than can serve as signs & reminders of our hope and faith in Christ,  
that we can tell to describe the steadfast faithfulness of God,  
symbols of God abiding presence in our world and in our lives?**

All of us have been effected by the events of our recent history,  
by the ways we've had to adjust to uncertainty & circumstances,  
hoping that God has been up to something all along the way,  
and realizing that we are not the same as we were before.

As we've just moved into a new year, is it possible,  
that God has something more and far better for us  
than just repeating our lives and faith that we lived last year?

**Could the challenges of last year have been God preparing us  
for something new, for our growth and journey this coming year?**

**Stagnation and repeat are never God's plan, or purpose or will for us.**  
God is about depth, change and growing our Christian character,  
with the assurance & hope that our fears, mistakes & struggles  
are never greater than or beyond **the reach of God's grace.**

Therefore we are always being called anew toward healing and change,  
to a much deeper and more faithful journey as we travel along  
this adventure of spiritual development that we call, life...  
**... for we are always in the process of being reshaped and reconfigured.**

The next 12 months, what change and growth and spiritual progress  
do you hope that God's grace and power will bring into your life?

Today we are challenged, to make good, wise and faithful decisions  
that will influence, even determine what we will see on that day.

**This year, we could position ourselves to improve our faith.**

Some years ago I decided to take God a lot more seriously,  
and so for that year I followed through trying  
to know, love, , serve and obey the Lord better.

To that end, during that entire year,  
I read at least one chapter of both New & Old Testaments everyday  
and if I missed a day, I doubled up my readings to catch up.

Also that year, I wrote my prayers in a personal journal every day,  
and every other book I read during that year was a religious one.

Whenever there was a decision that I needed to make,  
I tried to begin by first thinking about  
which choice or option would most likely improve my faith...

... and that year

**turned out to be among the best along my spiritual journey  
in which God blessed me with grace and purpose  
far beyond even my wildest thoughts or imaginings.**

So as we're moving into this next year, a new year,  
are you reasonably satisfied that you are on track toward  
where, what, and who God wants and intends you to be?

How well and faithfully  
did you handle the challenges and struggles of last year?,  
and was there anything you learned or gained  
that can help you navigate this coming year?

This year, let's not drift like a jellyfish in the ocean  
going with whatever and wherever the tide of culture takes us,  
for as God's beloved we're capable of so much better than that.

As we gather today to celebrate at the Lord's Table of grace,  
let us each listen within the quiet and solitude of our own hearts,  
daring to ask how we can best position ourselves this year  
so that God's Holy Spirit can do its growth-work in us...

... **and reflect on what we'd like our life to look like a year from now.**

Looking around at the troubles and strife in our world these days,  
we may wonder sometimes why it is that life is so difficult and hard,  
and seems to be more about struggle & strife than comfort and ease?  
**Maybe it's because God's still got some work to do in us yet  
before we'll be ready to live eternally in heaven's glory.**

So as Paul wrote in Philippians 3,

... straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God  
in Christ Jesus.

... **we're straining forward to what lies ahead, the promise of joy!**