

What Do These Stones Mean?

Joshua 4: 1-9

Don Lincoln

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls come a tumblin' down.....

That song has been sung by Elvis; Mahalia Jackson; Sunday school classes, high school and church choirs, and the Mormon Tabernacle choir just to name a few. Many of us have heard if not sung that song – and it may contain the sum total of what we know about Joshua. Our text tells us a little more – just a little – about the significance of a specific time in the life of Israel, about their leader, Joshua, who took charge following the death of Moses, and the moment Israel became a nation. You need to know that story.

It starts in the preceding chapter in the book of Joshua, which tells the story of Israel crossing the Jordan River into the land of Canaan – the land of milk and honey – the promised land. The people broke camp after their morning rituals, the priests picked up the ark of the covenant, which held the tablets of the law delivered to Moses on Mt. Sinai and headed for the Jordan River.

Although the river was at flood stage, the moment the priests carrying the ark dipped their toes in the river, the water upstream stopped flowing, and piled up in a huge heap. The priests carried the ark into the middle of the riverbed and stopped. And stood there on dry ground until the whole nation had crossed over. Our text picks up there:

Joshua 4: 1-9

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. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

Crossing the Jordan River was one of the key events in Israel's history. Just as the Red sea miracle changed Israel's status from slave to free, so the trek through the Jordan transformed Israel from a wandering band into a **landed people**, a nation.¹

Obviously, the story of the Jordan River crossing with the ark endured long after the ark was no longer present. We know this is so because we have the story here – but within the story itself is the reason it endured.

A regularly retold, explanatory ceremony, prompted by a child's question, passes on the memory of the event to future generations. "**What do these stones mean?**" The question prompts an explanation of the meaning of the event. "This was when God led Israel into the promised land."

It's a question asked within the family of faith – the community of faith – just as the question is asked at Passover: "**Why is this night different than all other nights?**" The answer to that question is at the very heart of the Passover story – it was the deliverance of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, as the forces of destruction passed over the Israelites and visited death on the Egyptians.

God's people are shaped by a common memory. This memory includes knowledge about the past, and membership in the faith requires personal identification with the meaning of the past events. Without remembering, there is no identity. Without common remembering there is no community.

"What do these stones mean?" Visible symbols – like liturgy and ritual – provide an interpretive memory of salvation events and a way of transmitting the faith story. Liturgy, ritual, symbol – and perhaps even more common, song – are the ways we remember. "**Joshua fit the battle of Jericho**" – composed and sung by slaves in the 19th Century – with hopes that one day the walls would "come a tumblin' down." A song – to memorialize, to remember, the power of God at work in a once enslaved people who were set free and given an opportunity to be a great people, and for a new community of slaves to hope it might be so again someday.

What do these stones mean? For Israel, they were signs of God's presence; God's power; God's providence. We gather together our thoughts, our story – and we remember through signs – markers – symbols of events we do not want to forget. Symbols like water, wine and bread.

I remember the first historic marker I ever saw, because it was right outside my neighborhood. It was at the edge of the town adjacent to where I grew up. The name of the town was Mt. Healthy.

I realize how funny the name is now but back then it just was what it was.

Right there on Hamilton Avenue was the marker that read this: Mount **Healthy** was founded in 1817 as the village **of Mount Pleasant**. In 1850, the village renamed itself "Mount **Healthy**", following a **cholera epidemic**, in which many of its citizens survived while those in the surrounding territories did not. During the Civil War, many homes in Mt. Healthy served as stations on the Underground Railroad, and the city generally was quite involved in seeking freedom for all people. Mt. Healthy still remembers.

For many, Memorial Day doesn't mean what it once did. For most, Memorial Day is just another Monday holiday. It marks the beginning of summer. It's the weekend of the Indy 500. School's almost out. The pools open. Not that today's temperatures are very inviting to a pool, or a picnic, or grilling out. That's what we always pray for – for Memorial Day weekend. That it's the first summer weekend. Memorial Day hasn't always been that way.



This is a picture of the grave of my wife Linda's uncle Mike. You can't really see the names on those crosses so when Chaplain Ed Brandt was visiting there – he went with a guide – she took the dark soil and rubbed it on the cross to give the relief for Michael's name. It is in the Henri Chapelle Cemetery in Belgium. Michael Bakos was four years old when he and his family emigrated from Hungary to America. He never had the opportunity to become an American citizen, but this young immigrant fought in a tank battalion in the US Army, and died in Germany in 1944 at age 23.

This picture and a flag that flew over that cemetery are always displayed in our home on Memorial Day.

What do these stones mean?

Too many of us have forgotten when Memorial Day began. We forget it was started after America's bloodiest war – a civil war amongst ourselves. A day to remember the fallen, but also to remember why they fell. To remember not only our heroes, but also

our tainted history – and the change that was required in this nation – a change that still has not come to completion.

That's why there have risen among us other markers – markers to remind us of different wars – like at the National Memorial For Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.



What do these stones mean? They represent the war of [racism](#) – and the thousands of victims of lynchings in this nation – and document the names of those known and counties in which they were killed.

We erect these stones so we can remember.

Memorial Day started as a day to remember fallen heroes and I still do, but surely it grew out of the

human need to remember where we have been. Because only when we remember where we have been, can we figure out where we are going. The cherished memories of a nation, of a town, of a church, or of a family provide the values and dreams that one generation passes on to the next. Forgetting means dropping the torch. Losing the light.

I found myself asking after reading this passage this week, what other stones need to be placed? Stones for victims of a pandemic which we call like a war and the enemy with whom we are doing? Stones at the site of yet another mass shooting?

Friends as followers as the God of Providence, you and I are called to remember, and to call upon the name of the LORD, that the walls of death, destruction, war and violence, might one day – indeed – come a tumblin' down.

May it be so.
AMEN.

1. Jerome F. D. Creach, *Interpretation Commentary on Joshua*, 2003.