

Stones of Memory and Hope

Joshua 4:1-3,8,19-24

God had used Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and now were at the Jordan River, the border to the Promised Land. Joshua was chosen by God to lead them across the Jordan into the Promised Land. The river however was swollen with seasonal rains and seemed impossible to cross.

God then gave Joshua these instructions: tell the priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant—the sacred box that held the Ten Commandments—into the water. When the priests' feet wade into the water, the waters will stop, and they all will be able to cross. Choose 12 men, one from each tribe of Israel and tell them to follow the priests into the river.

That's how faith works sometimes: we have to enter the river not knowing whether we will make it to the other side. Nancy Davis spoke last week of the importance of trying new ministries that scare us a little. We have no idea whether we will succeed or fail. A church consultant I used at another church for future planning said our plans should have a 50 percent of succeeding! One hundred percent chance of succeeding means we aren't relying on God to help.

There's an old black spiritual that expresses this kind of faith:

Wade in the waters

Wade in the waters children

Wade in the waters

God's gonna trouble the waters.

The priests obeyed and waded out into the river. God stopped the waters and the people passed over into the Promised Land. Sometimes a leap of faith is a leap of *action*. The positive-thinking Crystal Cathedral minister Robert Schuller liked to say: "Inch by inch life's a cinch." I'm not sure about that, but we could say: "Step by step, and God will help!"

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God then told the twelve men to pick up one stone each from the dry river bed and carry them across. So they did, and Joshua led them and all the people to Gilgal—which means "circle of stones", or "mound of stones." Joshua set up the 12 twelve stones there and said,

In time to come, when your children ask their parents, "What do these stones mean?", tell your children: "Here the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry land. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan.... Then all the peoples of the earth shall know how mighty is the hand of the Lord.

Have you ever wondered when singing “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” and came to the words, “Here I raise my Ebenezer/Hither by thy help I’ve come”, what an *Ebenezer* was? It means “stone of help”, used as a marker for when God had helped the nation.

Stones often mark important moments in our lives. A corner stone on a building, that stone on a ring on your finger. The seasons of the Christian year can be a circle of stones, stones of memory and hope. Advent, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, all telling of God’s wonderful works which lead us with hope and promise into the future.

Today, June 19, is Juneteenth, a historical marker of freedom finally given. On this day in 1865, Union soldiers rode into Galveston and declared the emancipation from slavery the President had enacted 2 1/2 years before. Joy erupted in Galveston that day. Sometimes it’s a long journey from the declaration of freedom and the living of it. Someone said of the experience of becoming a Christian, what we should feel is “my chains have fallen off!” not, “I better not mess up!” Juneteenth calls us to live our freedom and to fight for it for all.

Today we will gather stones of our past. What will we tell our children about them? Let’s see how they can lead us into the future.