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# A PILE OF STONES

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Joshua 4:1-24



MAY 25, 2014  
MEMORIAL DAY  
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April, 1863, Columbus Mississippi: Five years before Union General John A. Logan declared the day an occasion to decorate the graves of Civil War soldiers: After decorating the graves of her two sons, an elderly woman made her way over to two unmarked mounds of earth at the corner of the cemetery. "What are you doing?" asked a couple of other mourners, "Those are the graves of Union soldiers!" "I know," said the old woman. "I also know that somewhere up north a mother or a young wife mourns for them as we do for ours." That little band of ladies set in motion what became Memorial Day.

We live in a world full of markers and milestones. Cemeteries full of headstones. Roadside memorials. The Gateway arch in St Louis, the new Ground Zero memorial. A friend of mine who was a first responder at the Oklahoma bombing is still moved to tears when he talks about being at the memorial for that. Our country's capitol is full of monuments like the Washington monument, Lincoln Memorial or the Vietnam Memorial wall to name a few... White hill, and the historical society are local examples. They're everywhere!

When I was a boy scout – can you imagine? -- When I was a scout they taught us that when you see a stack or a pile of stones, it's a marker. From one pile of stones you can look and see where the trail goes by finding the next one. I thought that was pretty cool because it's a link to the past and a link for the future all at the same time. It's a marker that shows you where you've been and it shows others that you've been there.

We all have milestones and markers in our lives – good ones and not so good ones. I remember the very first time I tried methamphetamines – a not so good milestone. Medical diagnoses, divorce, marriages, all of these are milestones. Broken bones like the screws in my foot – scars from surgeries or injuries – all milestones – memorials – our own little piles of stones. This past week I got to see several kids graduate from high school. That's a huge milestone. Today is Memorial Day. Lots of milestones...

This morning we're looking at another monument – an ancient one, built to honor and to memorialize crossing the Jordan – a pretty important milestone. In looking at Joshua 4 we find that the Israelites actually set up two memorials -- two simple piles of stones. The people of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years – long enough

for a new generation to enter and occupy the Promised Land. So they crossed the river and didn't even get their feet wet!

Today I'm going to talk about three reasons why God might have wanted the Israelites to pile up the stones like this.

First of all, God wants people to remember. Of course in today's fast paced, over scheduled world we have so much to remember that we need to set our phones to remind us of important dates and appointments. I write everything down and then I can't remember where I put my notes! In the Old Testament God put the rainbow in the sky as a reminder. In our New Testament reading Paul was remembering the last Supper, which we celebrate every month – partly as a memorial to what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Here in Joshua 4 we find that God tells the people to take twelve stones, one for each tribe, from the dried up bed of the Jordan River, and they are told to stack them up as a memorial, as a reminder of what the Lord had just done. The stones were a reminder of where they had been, the stones were a reminder of who they were, the stones were a reminder of what the Lord had done, that the Lord had been with them through this journey. So, whenever they looked back at the Jordan River from the Promised Land, they would remember for years to come that God had been with them and had brought them into the land of Canaan. The stones, then, marked the boundary between hoping for that milk and honey and actually indulging in it.

The second reason that God told them to pile up the stones is to teach the children. In other words, this was not just for the current generation, but these stone piles were to be used as a teaching tool for the next generation. To most people who passed by those rock piles wouldn't mean anything; but God said that in the future, children would be passing by – maybe playing down by the river, and God says that the children will ask their parents, "What do these stones mean?" And twice in this chapter – so it MUST be important -- God says that children will ask their parents about the meaning of these stones.

We can imagine a family traveling by the Jordan River decades, maybe hundreds of years later, the kid sees this pile of rocks, it is obviously not a natural rock formation, and the kid asks, "Why are those rocks piled up like that?" What a typical kid question! Like, "Why is the sky blue?" Or "Are we there, yet?" And this is why God had them put

those rocks there! They're a visual aid – a springboard to a teaching moment. The monuments gave parents one more tool for teaching their children about their faith.

This is a big issue today in American churches. If we don't teach our children about our church and our faith, the church will die. The same was true for ancient Israel. In fact, in Judges 2:10 it says, "...that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know God or the work that God had done for Israel." That passage goes on to explain that the next generation very quickly went on to worshipping Baal and the other pagan Gods. The parents had failed to teach their children. And so here in Joshua 4, God was very clear and repeated it twice: Parents were to use these stones as a way of teaching their children about what God had done.

Now, we are extremely grateful for everything that our children learn in Sunday school, and the public school system, but if they don't get it at home -- if parents are not willing to at least try to answer their faith questions and to encourage them to be active in the church -- then we are not listening to what the Scriptures teach us. We can tell our children and grandchildren about how we first learned about God, and why we even go to church at all. We can tell them about communion when they ask and the fellowship of sharing the last supper with Christian churches all over the world on the first Sunday of every month.

When we write out our check for church or volunteer as ushers or liturgists we can explain how important it is to sacrifice a little part of our valuable time and money as a gift to God. When we discover something interesting in our daily devotion we can share it with our kids. So, the memorial stones were not only for the benefit of those who actually crossed the river, but also for the benefit of countless future generations.

The third reason that God had the Israelites create those monuments was to honor God. In verse 24 we find that these stones were to be piled up, "... [so] that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever." The word "fear" here doesn't mean cowering or being afraid of God, as much as it means to respect God – to experience God with awe and reverence. We do that through worship, and every time an Israelite passed by this monument, they would "know that the hand of the Lord is mighty." They would know that God was

worthy of their worship. The monument was a statement: “When you see this, remember.”

Today, as Christians we also have a responsibility. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” When we’ve been Christians for a while, sometimes we end up spending most of our time with other Christians. Of course they need our light too! But we need to get involved with the community, to show people out there what Christian life is really about. That is our challenge as a congregation. 3,000 years ago – give or take -- that pile of stones was put there as a monument to honor God; an act of worship so that the world would know what the God had done.

So let’s remember how forgetful we are, because we look around, and we can see memorials all around us. The ancient Israelites were told to simply pile up some rocks. Those stones were to serve as a reminder, they were to serve as a tool for teaching the next generation, and they were to serve as a way of honoring God.

It’s interesting, too, that there were two piles of stones that day. One pile was made by the men of Israel as these stones were taken out of the river and piled up in Gilgal, the place where the people spent the first night in the Promised Land. But the second pile was made by Joshua, and the pile he made was actually in the river. And that means, if you think about it, those stones (that memorial) would only be visible to God. Joshua put those stones right there in the river where the priests were standing with the Ark of the Covenant, and once the waters were released, those stones could only be seen by God.

This memorial day, take a few minutes to remember your piles of stones – your landmarks and milestones that can be seen by everyone or maybe they’re only visible to you and God. How can you use them, not only to remember; but how can you use them as a tool to teach the youth and children, and how can you use them to honor God?

Amen