

## **Stacked Up for a Purpose**

Joshua 4:1-7, 19-24

November 2, 2008

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 these 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 people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped at Gilgal on the east boarder of Jericho. Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, “ When you children ask their parents in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the people of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Late one morning, about three months after I had been here, the front office put a call through to my desk. I was busy and not really in the mood to talk, but I picked up the phone. A woman was on the other end of the line, asking for help. Things had been pretty tight and she had fallen behind on her bills. She was out of work, and at her wit's end. In our conversation, she also mentioned that she was a member of the church.

Now I have handled a lot of calls from people seeking help from the church – both here, and in my last congregation. I know that people will say just about anything to get what they need. I probably would too, if I was worried about where my next meal was coming from. I referred the woman to a local agency – and took down her number, telling her that I would call her back. Then, I asked the front desk to verify her claim that she was, indeed, a member.

After some digging, it turned out that she was right – though she had been inactive for a very long time. About a week later, I called on her to follow-up with the referral. She was grateful for the help and the call, and asked if she could come by the church to express her thanks. We sat in my office for a few minutes, her eyes wet with tears and me listening, while she shared some of her story. When we were wrapping things up, she asked if she could go and sit in the sanctuary. I obliged, walking with her while she continued to talk about her past involvement with the church.

When we entered the sanctuary, she stopped talking and became very reverent. Her eyes filled up with tears again and she made a bee-line for a particular pew. Sitting in it, she remembered out loud who used to sit around her; how the children used to sing from the transept balcony on Christmas Eve; how Frank Alexander used to sound from the pulpit. She wondered if it would be alright for her to stay in the sanctuary for a while and just sit. I told her it would fine. About 30 minutes later, I came back to check on her and she was in the same pew, looking up at the rafters, lost in thought.

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Last Sunday morning while I was with the Electives Class leading a discussion about visioning for the upcoming capital campaign,

Carolyn Ogilvie shared this brochure with me that described the “new church facility on Jordan Street.” The brochure is from 1926, and was created by the session for the congregation in advance of the church moving from its place downtown to our present location. It is well worth a read – clearly indicating the excitement in the congregation about a new space for ministry and mission. Listen to this tidbit that describes walking into the sanctuary...

The worshippers walking down these aisles pass the principal seating and are partially screened from the audience by massive pillars of masonry which support the super-structure, the clerestory walls and the roof. The wooden beams of the ceiling and heavy timbered trusses together with the massive walls and thick-mullioned tracery windows of this vast sanctuary are all expressive of strength and majesty. A restful atmosphere is thus created as the pews, the organ case, light fixtures, stained glass windows, carpets and other furnishings are in excellent harmony.<sup>1</sup>

What jumps out at me about this description are two things: First is the intentionality given to creating a space. If you read the rest of the description you will see that the design of our church has a purpose. Those who built this church did so with a vision in mind of who God was calling us to be. The other thing that jumps out at me about this description of the sanctuary are the words “strength” and “majesty.”

These are words meant to describe more than the sanctuary. They are words meant to describe God.

Last week when I read this brochure, the image I had in mind was of the woman who called my office – broken and fearful – sitting in this room (the sanctuary) looking up at the ceiling. And I believe that being here reminded her of the strength and majesty of God; the God who claimed her and sustains her; the God who claims and sustains us.

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In our text this morning we are left with a question “When your children ask their parents in times to come, ‘What do these stones

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<sup>1</sup> From “History: First Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, Louisiana”. Compiled by Jasper K. Smith and Dolph G. Frantz.

mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’”

What do those stones mean?

Those stones tell a story. They tell a story about a people who were once no people and who were without a place. They tell a story about a people who were once slaves in the land of Egypt. They tell a story about a God who claimed this people, led them out of slavery, on a journey, and into a promise.

What do those stones mean?

They are not stacked up without reason. They do not exist simply to be seen; they exist to tell a story about a God of liberation and salvation, and they exist so that those who hear the story about this God will have their lives transformed.

What do those stones mean?

They are evidence of something that is unshakably true: that God has been with us and that God will be with us. And those stones become the foundation from which God calls us to share the good news.

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In the next few months as a congregation we are going to spend a lot of time talking about our building. Right now we are in the process of articulating those things that make us distinctive as a congregation; who are we and what do we do well? This Wednesday we are going to spend some time imagining our future; what kind of church is God calling us to be in the next 10 years?

Eventually, this visioning work will express itself in a plan for these buildings that house our church. These stones that have been stacked up and shaped by faithful generations before us.

There are things that we all know need to be done. It is no secret that our roof needs some work, the peeling plaster is evidence of that fact.

Our HVAC system is near the end of its life. Our electrical system is outdated.

We are also faced with an opportunity – a generational opportunity – to think about how our building might best serve our ministry and mission both now and in the future. Who we understand ourselves to be and who we understand ourselves to serve will inform how those decisions are made.

The outcome of these conversations will be a plan – and that plan will require significant resources. Assuming things proceed on course, next spring each of us will be asked to make a financial commitment to this project. We will be spending money – significant money – on this building: its renovation, restoration, and, perhaps, reconfiguration.

I have already been asked – many times, and in many different ways – why spend this kind of money on ourselves? It is a good question. One that takes seriously the calling of the church to be about Christ's presence in the world. One that takes seriously our historic identity as a church committed to mission and outreach.

It is true: if we are motivated to focus significant time and resources on our building only for the sake of making it a nicer place to look at, we miss the mark. But that is not why we are taking this step.

It is important that we understand our building is, in and of itself, a mission. It is the place where we are nourished by God's word and witness to Jesus Christ. It is the place where we are nurtured by genuine Christian community – a community that is honest and loving and committed, to the point of calling us to a deeper sense of ourselves. This church is the place of inclusion – where the table is open to all who desire to come taste and see that the Lord is good. It is a place where we learn. It is a place where we worship. It is the place where we are disciplined into loving our neighbors as ourselves. It is a place from which we reach out – into our city and into our world.

This building is also a place that helps us tell the story of the God who claims us in Jesus Christ. The God who claims us through the waters

when we think we deserve it and when we do not. Who loves us in spite of our brokenness. This building is designed to speak of God's majesty and God's strength. To remind us of our story that is rooted in a history of liberation and salvation and points toward a future that is full of hope.

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This building does not exist for itself. It does not exist to meet our every need. It exists to tell a story. So that when our children, or when those whom we serve, or when those who are unfamiliar with the church come as ask us "what do these stones mean?" we can answer them: this is the place where we gather; and where we remember that the God who created us and claimed us and redeemed us has also set us about a particular way of life. A way of life that is rooted in a love of God and a love of God's people.

It is a story that we are privileged to tell. Privileged to tell in this space – provided by the saints of this church who surround us and whose story influences our own. Those saints who urge us to carry forward the particular way God has called this congregation to be a witness to the liberating, saving love of Jesus Christ.

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May it be so. Amen.