

Stones That Speak
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
December 31, 2017 – PM Sermon
Rev. Ruth Boven
Joshua 4:1-9

I chose this text for tonight's service because this story gives us something solid to hold onto as we stand at the edge of a new year.

You see, the Israelites too stand at the edge of something new. Theirs has been a pilgrimage beyond imagining. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt to Pharaoh and their great escape through the Red Sea, and then forty more years of wandering around in the wilderness, the people are now poised at the Jordan with a single river-crossing between them and home, between them and the end of their wanderings, between them and the promised land.

It would be hard, I think, to overstate Israel's longing for home.

And even though you and I may feel pretty settled in our lives, in the places we live, in what we do, we get the Israelites. Because there is still something deep inside each one of us that longs for home, longs for a greater settledness in a world of uncertainty, a greater sense of security in a world where so much is out of our control.

The pastor and author, Craig Barnes, in his book *Searching for Home* says, "When my parishioners come into my office to talk about the issues of their lives, they will often describe their frustrations with jobs, marriage, children, or the lack of these things in their lives. Or they may want to talk about their calling in life, or their overwhelming grief over a loved one who has died. But these are the most available of their emotions and desires. Just behind these needs is the deeper longing to get to the place where life seems right again. That is what home is; it's the right place, the place where we belong, where we know who we are and whose we are," says Barnes.

Now remember that for a long time Israel had trusted Moses as the one to lead them home. And Moses had led them very near to this monumental place in their history, but then up in the hills over-looking the Jordan valley, Moses died. And Israel needed a new leader;- a leader that could keep them safe and show them the way ahead. So God raised up Joshua to lead them across the flooded Jordan to the place, where, by God's grace and promise, they belong.

That's why the Jordan River Valley became such a vital symbol to God's people. It was a place of new starts, new beginnings, and new hope in a leader that would help them get to the place where life would be right again. The Jordan River Valley was the place where God clearly, powerfully demonstrated his unfaltering commitment to God's people, and his unshakable plan to bring them safely home.

And you need to know this about the stage on which this love story is played out: the Jordan River Valley is the lowest place on the face of the earth. It is twelve hundred feet below sea level. The scholar NT Wright says if you want to get any lower than this, you'll have to dig.

Picture this: in a worldview that goes heaven, then earth, then hell below, here in the Jordan Valley we are one step above hell. And so, here in the lowest place on the landscape of all the earth God is present with God's people. The Ruler of Heaven, by way of the ark the priests carry, is present and is leading his own children through those deep, dark, watery depths .

Let's just stop and take that in a moment. The reigning all-powerful God of the universe so desires to be with his people that he comes down to be present, to be near as they walk through one of the lowest, scariest places on their journey. That friends, is something to take into the new year.

And that something becomes even weightier when you realize that one day, centuries later, from out of the crowd gathered on Jordan's banks, came a young man with the Hebrew name Joshua, or in Greek, *Jesus*, who would also humbly muddy his feet in the depths of the Jordan River.

Let's remember what was said of his coming, "you'll find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger." The Savior of God's people, the long awaited Messiah, in a feed trough among the steaming dung and smoking nostrils of farm animals. The presence of Almighty God right in the middle of our lowly, everyday life.

My guess is, like me, you need help remembering that. So did the Israelites.

So God gave them a sign. It was to be made of stones, stones that came right from the place where the priests stood in the Jordan, the place where God's presence had rescued and protected them. And first those stones were to be put on the shoulders of the leaders of the 12 tribes and brought to each tribe's camp, dropped right there in the middle of life's dirt and dust, in the midst of children playing, neighbors arguing, fathers diapering, mothers shuffling bills, teenagers checking Instagram. Stones, reminders of God's presence with them placed right there – in the vortex of their everyday life.

And then those stones were gathered up. And Joshua made an altar of them. He put them together in such a way that they'd be noticed and children would ask, "What do these stones mean?" And then the people would get to tell the story; the love story of a God who came and made his home with them and whose deepest longing was for each one of them to find their home in him.

And from our place in history those stones tell an even greater story. They tell of a God who would come again with power and mercy; in Jesus, in our risen-from-the-dead LORD, to be with us in our everyday lives; in the midst of our ups and down, our hopes and fears, our accomplishments and mistakes, our health and sickness, our joy and sorrow, our best times and our very lowest, most difficult times. God with us and for us...not just some of the time, but all of the time. That's what the stones say.

How do we face the uncertainty of a year, a future that we cannot control, in a world not of our own making?

Well, we look back at that pile of stones on the banks of the Jordan. And we listen to those who tell us of an empty tomb. And we treasure the testimonies, the stories, the stones others have given us that speak of God's powerful love.

Like the stone given to us by Corrie TenBoom, who despite the brutal conditions of the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during WW2 along with her sister Betsy, secretly helped and shared the hope of the Gospel with many women. Corrie, having endured the brutality and horrors of that place, including the death of her sister there, upon her release could still proclaim that, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."

And like the stone given to us by the late Rev. Ed Dobson who endured in his body for many years the debilitating effects of ALS until he died in 2015. Ed wrote this in his book called Prayers and Promises. "Having a terminal disease is like drowning in deep water. And just as you are about to go under. God reaches down from on high and takes hold of you. I visualize reaching up with my right hand, which is very weak, and taking the hand of God, which is not weak but all-powerful. ...As long as God is my rock, I will not sink into the depths. As long as God is my Savior, I know that ultimately deliverance will come. It may be in this life or it may be in the life to come, but either way he is my Savior."

You have stories to tell too, stones to give away. In fact in the narthex tonight as you leave, you're invited to take a stone with you.

Maybe you'd like to set it somewhere so that someone might ask you what that stone means.

Maybe you'd like to carry it with you in your purse or pocket as an encouragement to listen well in the coming year to the stories and testimonies of the people God puts in your path.

Maybe you'll place your stone somewhere as a reminder that there is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still.

No matter what you do tonight, we are given another reminder. And it comes to us from Jesus with an invitation to eat and drink, and remember and believe, that God's unrelenting love was made known to us in him, in Immanuel, our Savior, who came to make his home with us so that we might find our true home in him.

Thanks be to God!