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Stones of Remembrance

1 Peter 2: 4-5

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

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.)

I love rocks! I've always been fascinated especially by striated rock, like that in the Grand Canyon, where you can see layer after layer of history on display, each layer telling a story of the time it was formed... the environmental conditions, the types of plants and animals that existed at the time, sometimes leaving fossils or remains behind, just waiting to

be discovered. Oh, if these stones could talk, imagine the history that we could learn, the stories of people and places long gone in the recesses of time. In the US, we aren't always surrounded by the stones of history... our country is relatively young, and especially in the tri-state area, it's pretty well developed with buildings constructed from wood and human-made materials, rather than the stone work you can see in the older countries and lands in the Eastern Hemisphere. When I was in Seminary, I had the opportunity to participate in a cross-culture trip to Turkey, where I saw for the first time ancient ruins, like those spread all around Europe and Asia. I was struck by the stories that these thousand year old stone structures could tell about the people and cultures of the time, like unintentional memorials left for us to wonder about and discover. Some of my favorite discoveries were the stone walls that had been built in times of scarcity, constructed in patchwork style from the stone remnants available to them at the time. Some walls had fragments of old columns that had once stood around the edifice of grand buildings of old, now plugged haphazardly into the mix-match of new structures... and I couldn't help but wonder about all the history that was reflected within those walls... Oh, if these stones could talk!

Sometimes, I think stones pick up memories of their own, perhaps better said, they are witnesses to the events that unfold around them. It is because of this, along with their permanence, that we utilize stones to help us tell our stories, to hold our memories, and memorialize those people/times/places that we don't want to forget. For some years now, whenever I'm on vacation or traveling, I would always keep my eyes open for really cool looking rocks... not perfect, but memorable, so I could use them as memory stones to memorialize great days and trips for years to come. This dish here holds my Remembrance Stones, through which are stored some pretty amazing memories, of wonderful experiences and great people! The rocks in and of themselves are, well, plain rocks. But attach the story of each one and they become a treasure. These rocks are touchstones that point outward to something else, something special.

Our scripture this morning from Joshua told a story of stones and how we can use them to remember the way God is at work in our lives. In this Old Testament story of Joshua and the Israelites crossing the Jordan River on dry land, we hear how God made a way where there was none and brought them into the Promised Land. The Israelites had waited forty years, but now the time had come. Behind them, they leave decades of traveling through a barren wilderness and the tragic memories of slavery in Egypt. A new and welcome chapter opens before them! It must have felt surreal to finally stand in Canaan!

Then God told Joshua to choose 12 ordinary men, to go smack into the center of the Jordan where the priests had carried the ark, and each to pick up a rock and bring it back "to serve as a sign among you." But the instructions don't stop there... for the work of remembering is not done even when the memorial is built... We must share the meaning and significance of such memories with generations to come. "In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them..." "...tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

These memorial stones are not just to commemorate an event in history, but to tell the story of how God journeys with us, working in our lives, making even the impossible seem possible! These are the stories that our scripture encourages us to hold onto... stories that highlight not the struggle in the wilderness, or the battle for freedom, but the abiding and empowering presence of God. And we are reminded of the importance of TELLING OUR STORIES! Memories and memorials are not kept simply for "memory's sake", but rather because they are a reminder of a part of who we are, not only for ourselves, but for those who come after us as well. "When your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' Tell them!" Each time we tell our stories... God's stories... we are allowing these Stones of Remembrance to live once again and to impact how our story continues to unfold.

On this Memorial Day weekend, when our minds so naturally turn to war and hatred, to the lives of those we've lost because of power struggles between world leaders, let us choose to lift up our Stones of Remembrance and tell the stories about the love of God and how God is at work in our world. And as our memories are shared, as we pass on our legacy of love, may we live into the hope of God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen!