

“These Stones”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Joshua 4:1-9
August 19, 2018
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This brief tale of Joshua and the Twelve Stones, contains barely enough action to even be considered a story. It doesn't show up in the Revised Common Lectionary. There are no VeggieTales dedicated to it. None of these verses get cross-stitched onto pillows. This story is a footnote. It's a quirky detail, like those long chapters in the book of Exodus that describe with excruciating specificity how to build the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle.

This story has a bit of a “happily ever after” epilogue feel. But we know that this is nowhere near the end of the joys, the relief, the struggles, and the movement — both voluntary and by force — of the people of the covenant between God and Abraham. There's so much more to come — so this is just an interlude.

It lacks the cinematic oomph of the Red Sea — there are no Egyptians trailing and Joshua is no Charlton Heston. It has none of the danger of the Passover, none of the drama of the struggles between God and the people as they wandered Sinai. It has none of the violence of the battles to come. It's not particularly triumphant, like the fall of Jericho which comes two chapters later. It's not a summer blockbuster. It's more like a “Thing that happened that one time...”

No, this story isn't much.

It's simply a story...of a people who have followed their God against all odds and any common sense and their own intuition. They have gone through turmoil and death and long hot days and dark chilly nights. They have endured fear and recalcitrance and sand in their lunches and they have come out on the other side, and when they get to the place they've been going for four decades — when they get home — they stop.

And they make the clergy wait.

They leave them standing out there in the middle of the river, and they listen to what God has to say. And they mark the occasion in a tangible, visible, stony way.

They breathe in the moment.

They take stock.

They ponder the future.

They think about the next generation — a generation that won't know what it's like to wander in the desert — a generation that will live in this new land.

They look beyond themselves.

They plan for this story to be told for years to come — The story of the river parting, but also the long journey there and all those who didn't make it and the rebellions in the wilderness and the pillars of cloud and fire and the sacrifices made and manna and quail and unleavened bread and burning bushes and midwives conspiring against the empire and dreamers and covenants and all the stars in the sky and what happened *in the beginning...*

Here, at the river, the people take time to ensure that they will always tell the big, messy, living story of What God Did.

We are on the cusp of a new church school year. To be clear: we have done some truly wonderful ministry and taken part in sacred and beautiful worship this summer. But it is simply true that in what passes for “the fall” in the South, people come back to church. The crowds grow and our programming revs up. Next week is Rally Day, and we’ll celebrate the start of Sunday school classes and we’ll commission teachers and have a party in the park. And then we go back to that calling — to remembering our story as we look to what God has in store for us in days to come.

For nearly one hundred six years, this congregation has sought to be the church, to go where God would bring us, despite not always being sure of where the journey might lead. With a willingness to trust God, to follow a dream, and to invest in the future, this congregation made a home on this corner and has been doing faithful ministry here ever since. We have chosen resurrection life in Christ over the gloomy tomb wanderings prescribed by the supposed state of the Mainline Protestant Church. Day by day, we are planning to live into God’s promises for another generation.

Now, I love it here, but I lack the ecclesiastical credentials to declare Edgewood Presbyterian Church “The Promised Land.” I haven’t checked the kitchen to see how we’re doing on milk and honey.

But this is a place where nobody really cares if you’re divorced or single or older or younger. It’s a place where the elders are gay and straight, and the Sunday school teachers too, and where the content of your character is paramount, but we’re also willing to have some uncomfortable conversations about race. It’s a place where everyone’s been through at least a little bit of mess and so nobody ever seems to think about casting stones. For so many of us, this place has felt unlike any other holy place. It’s felt like home — like a place God might bring you after a bit of wandering.

This congregation has a story to tell, and I don’t know all of it. None of us know all of it. But do you know who else doesn’t know our story? That next group of people — people that we have yet to meet! — who will come visit to see what’s going on here and end up part of our church family. There are real, live, people out there — who at some point will show up in here! And they’ll bring with them their stories, and they’ll want to know what ours is. And so we’ve got to practice telling it.

We’ve got a story of trials and tribulations and joys and hard-won successes and modern day miracles. We’ve got a story of faithfulness about how we got to where we are and how these stones got to be where they are. We’ve got our own slice of the big tale of What God Did.

We are called to be keepers of the stones — for ourselves and for this church. No matter where we go, no matter what shadows threatens to swallow us up or obstacles get thrown into the path, we must always come back to the stones by the river that tell the story of What God Did.

We tell the truth about the glory of God. We tell the truth about our struggles. We tell the truth, because that's how we pass on the tradition of redemption and hope and faithfulness. We tell the truth to protect our future from ignorance and from the sinister growth of mistrust and indifference.

I'm sure you've heard about the horrifying grand jury report out of Pennsylvania this week, in which Catholic priests who were granted the greatest trust violated it in the most horrible ways, harming generations of children. And those higher up the chain, called to keep the institution accountable, violated their sacred call to protect children, choosing instead to protect the institution. If only someone, at some point, in Philadelphia or Boston or Rome or anywhere else this vile system was growing had taken a stroll to the river and seen the stones and remembered what they mean.

I imagine the Israelites wondered what God-through-Joshua was up to. Sure, this whole river stone ritual seemed like a nice little memorial. But I bet they found out that you make more trips to the stones than you expected.

That's where you go when new people show up. And when it's time to celebrate. And when you've got a big decision to make in your relationships or your vocation or your budget. It's where you go when you need to get grounded. And when the world is slipping through your fingers like grains of sand and you're not sure how to find answers or even the right questions or maybe even how to put one foot in front of the other.

In response to God's call, God's leading, God's Word, if you find yourself lost, this community will come alongside you and say, "Hey, let's take a walk by the riverside and see what we see."

Each Lord's Day we mark a moment here.

We take a look at where God has led us individually and as a community in the past week — and we zoom out and see where God has been leading us all along.

We stop.

We breathe in a moment, taking time to notice that we are here.

We listen to God and we know that this is home — a new home together every week — and we don't know what stories await us but we know that we will go through the rejoicing and the lamenting together, though we pray for more of the former than the latter.

Standing here we look beyond ourselves and ponder the future and plan for the next generation. We pray and we sing and sit in silence...and we preach and we do things with bread and water and wine and we laugh — all of it to tell the world and one another and our own needy hearts what we know about What God Did.

May God continue to call this beloved community to tell the wild tales of God's transformative grace and unyielding love -- to share that story with the world, with anyone who has ears to hear, and especially with any child of God who asks, "Say, what do these stones mean?"

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.