

Augusta First Baptist Church
Joshua 4:1-7
Challenges of Faith: Remembering our Heritage
March 25, 2007
Lent 2007
190th Anniversary

Joshua 4:1-7

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: [2] "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, [3] 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.' " [4] Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. [5] 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, [6] so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' [7] 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."

As a kid in school, I must confess to you, history was not one of my better subjects. Actually, I loathed my classes in history. It wasn't the teacher's fault. In my impetuous youth, I just could not see the significance and meaning of events that happened long before my time. I hope I have grown up. I like to read and learn about history now, but, I wonder if I was not the only one who felt that way about history.

Which leads me to the question, what is this day really about? Is it about our history? Is it merely an occasion where we reflect over a 190 years of past, eat some BBQ, and go home? Or maybe, just maybe, it is a time to remember the hand of God in our history, and discover that the hand of God that firmly gripped Israel and led them to the Promise, is one and the same, who gripped just a handful of folks in 1817. Today, is a day that we humbly acknowledge God's grasp upon us and to discover where shall we go from here.

"All of life," Madeleine L'Engle writes, "is a story." And so it is, today is a day of story. This day is a day, where the stones speak a story into being, and call us ever onward to the Promise of God's people.

In the book of Joshua, we read that the children of Israel are about to step into God's promise. They had longed for it, prayed for it, worked for it. And now, it was before them. But, before entering in, God instructed Joshua to take twelve rocks and stack them, twelve rocks that represent the twelve tribes of Israel. But, they are not just a pile of river rocks. Joshua is told that when the children of Israel look upon this pile and are asked, "What do these stones mean to you?" they are to tell a story. They are to tell of what God has done for his children, how God has provided a way for them where there was none before. They are not just a pile of rocks. They have a story to tell for those that are willing to listen. Today is a day where we listen to the stones speak.

Have you ever heard a stone speak? Oh I have, many times. There are piles of rocks throughout the pastures and woods of our family's farm. They are the remains of chimneys from tenant farmers who lived on the place and scratched out a living chopping cotton, hoeing corn, and milking cows. On one particular wood line are two piles of rocks, the only thing remaining of a house that no one in my family remembers inhabited. Since the time Amy and I were dating, we would walk among those rocks and dream of building a house there. We would take some of those rocks and mark out the boundaries of the home and place stones along where we thought the chimney would be. It was our idea that we could use all those stones to make the fireplace.

We have moved on, and those dreams have given way to other realities. But, we still walk around the edge of those woods where cows graze and black birds call and listen to those rocks, those stones that hold so much memory.

We stand here today among the storied lives of those rocks, both living and dead. Have you ever listened to the stones of this place, this church campus? Or, what about our former facility on Eighth and Greene? At first glance, anyone can see that these are buildings shaped to look like a church – impressive, of course – but at the end of the day they are just buildings. They are made up of rather common materials: lumber and shingles, bricks and mortar, sweat and blood.

But, if you heard these stones speak they would not merely speak of buildings and place, they would speak of dreams, vision and holy imagination. They would speak of confronting impossible odds. Take for example our founding on March 25, 1817. A mere fifty years before that date, it was illegal to preach a teaching different than the state church, what we now call Episcopalians. Daniel Marshall was arrested right here in Augusta in 1772. Why on earth, just fifty years later after Marshall’s arrest, would any group think about praying and starting a church and in 1820 pool their money together to build a building? Because they heard the stones of the past speak. They remembered the old, old stories found in the Bible. They remembered the stories like the one we read of this morning in Joshua.

When Israel looked to Jordan and saw those twelve stones, they didn’t just see another pile of rocks or a memorial to what God did in their past. Their children knew that they were rocks – anyone could see that. They wanted to know, “What do these stones mean to you?” In other words, they wanted meaning. They wanted to know if the light that shone and broke forth in their history could shine anew in their time, they wanted to see that if God faithfully abided and led in the life of their ancestors, could God do it all over again, even when we are not so faithful. Those stones and our stones, too, speak of God’s fidelity and invite us to testimony, to a movement beyond a memory.

The stones here are aching to not just be another pile of rocks, shaped like a building. Neither are our stones set up to be simply a memorial, a museum to the past but saying little about the present. Most anybody in construction can make rocks look like a church. Buildings only tell part of the story. We are, after all, not a place but a people. We are about mission, not simply membership. As a people, we have much to celebrate of our past and much to anticipate for our future. Just as it was in our beginning, so it is today: *Let your light shine that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven* (Matthew 5:16).

What could these stones possibly be saying today? They speak, they pulse, they sing of the new day God is holding before us. The stones are calling us to see a world shadowed by despair and injustice. They offer hope and justice to a world disjointed and confused, and so, we are to bring order and peace, to see a world at odds with itself and desperate, and lead them to salvation and new beginnings. Let us not simply look and see, let us move forward from programs, to people, and move forward from members, to missions.

Yes, we walk among the stones of memory, of where we have been and who has led us. But the Lord says, “When your children ask, **‘what do these stones mean to you,’**” you tell them, not just of our past, but of our future.

Maya Angelou challenged our nation fourteen years ago with these words:

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no more hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than the angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness, Have lain too long face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spilling words armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face...here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out and into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country and say simply, Very simply
With hope, "Good morning."

"Here, on the pulse of this new day" as Mayo Angelo penned, we, the members of FBC are challenged to know the difference: the difference between a memorial and a testimony, the difference between a museum and a living family, the difference between a pile of rocks and stones with a story. The difference will depend on the difference you and I make.

The stones do not tell the story on their own. We have enough monuments to the past. Let us walk hand in hand to the future before us. I ask you to give these stones something to say! Let your light shine.

When this very sanctuary was dedicated in 1983, Dr. George Ballentine, a former pastor, was invited to return and preach. He preached on this very text of scripture from Joshua. At the time, I was a senior in high school, born and raised in an inconspicuous county some 60 miles from here. He hoped in his sermon, that some pastor after him might choose this text of scripture to preach from. When the question in scripture is asked "What do these stones mean?" Dr. Ballentine said, "I would like for them to remember that these stones speak of people in this place, who stood tall in their faith, a people who did a beautiful extravagance for God out of their love, in order that they might share that love with the world around them and beyond them, a people who did a beautiful thing, not merely for themselves, but also, for the children whom one day will ask their fathers, their mothers, 'What mean these stones?'"

Dr. George Ballentine died about a year ago, and I gratefully move forward from his legacy, and the legacy of countless others. This is my commitment to you as pastor, for these stones will speak of me too: I will be a pastor who **prays** for you and prays for our community and prays for God's will and purpose. I will be a pastor who **preaches**. It is fundamental in my calling, not to tell you what you want to hear, but what we need to hear about the Rock of Ages. I will be a pastor who **listens**. We have needs and longings, and my calling is to keep an attentive ear to the stirrings of your soul. I will be a pastor who **represents** you. I have a priestly role, not as a substitute for you, but one who is willing to stand with you, and accompany you on this journey we share.

You just heard my job description in four simple words: **pray, preach, listen, represent**. All the other stuff may be important, but if I cannot prioritize these four things, then I am failing you as pastor and I am neglecting the memory of my ordination so many years ago.

Jesus once said "...if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40). For nearly two centuries we have proclaimed, sung, prayed and celebrated God's work in our midst. The stones don't have to tell the story. We do. And one day our children, like the children of Israel of old, will pass by these stones we call the church house, and ask: "*What do these stones mean to you?*"

Tell them!