

Decide to remember

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Date: 04 October 2020

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[0:00] Our reading this morning is from Joshua, chapter 4, verses 1 to 9. When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you.

In the future, when your children ask you, What do these stones mean? 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.

[1:26] So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua.

And they carried them over to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan, at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood.

And they are there to this day. Well, good morning, everyone. And thank you, Sue, for that reading. We're continuing our series today, looking through, working through the book of Joshua.

And last week, if you remember, we saw the Israelites face with a seemingly insurmountable task as they looked at this massive flooded river, the River Jordan standing between them and the Promised Land.

But God had a plan, and God made a way for them to pass through. And the people crossed in the light of God's presence, passing by the ark, which was held in the middle of the river.

[2:40] Now in chapter four, God tells Joshua to instruct people to do something to ensure they don't forget this amazing event. Now, I'm really grateful to Sarah and Isaac and Daniel for what they shared earlier.

We saw in their home, there are lots of things to help them remember. The timer. Did you see the trophy? Did you know that Byron is a former champion canoeist? It's amazing what you discover, isn't it? If we were to look in any of our homes, we would find things that remind us of important events that have happened in the past.

Perhaps pictures of weddings, graduations, maybe trinkets and ornaments from places we've visited, maybe tickets and programs from events that we've been to in the past.

But how were the Israelites to remember this amazing event of them crossing the Jordan? Well, it's something that would appeal to any children who visited a pebbly beach.

They collected rocks. And I don't know if any of the parents have had that conversation with their children on holiday. They say, no, we can't take that rock home. We've already got a whole bag full of rocks.

[3:49] We can't take another one. But the Israelites were told to pick up rocks from the bed of the River Jordan. And I think they were probably quite big, heavy rocks because they were told in verse 5 that they had to carry those rocks on their shoulders.

Twelve men were to pick up these rocks, one for each of the tribes of Israel. And in verse 3, it says that they were to take the stones from right where the priests were standing.

So in verse 8, the twelve representatives took up the stones and they put them down at their new campsites. Now, remember the significance of this place where they're camping on Gilgal, on the opposite bank of the River Jordan.

This is the first night that they spend in the Promised Land after such a long wait, such a long journey to get there. But this is the first thing they do, putting down these stones.

They don't have a meal first. They don't have a rest. They make something to remember what just happened. And in verse 9, Joshua sets up the twelve stones from the spot where the Ark of the Covenant had stood in the river.

[4:57] Now, we don't know how he set them up, whether they were stuck in the ground like standing stones or gravestones, or perhaps they were arranged in a mound like a cairn.

Maybe he managed to stack them all up. I've got a picture here of some rocks that I stacked up. Well, I was on the beach in Hyde in Kent with my family earlier this summer. And while my kids were in the water, I went in the water very briefly and then was too cold, so I tried to stack up rocks on the beach.

And if you can see that picture, there are twelve rocks in the picture, but there's only eleven in the stack because the twelfth one is actually propping up the bottom one to get it to the right level. I didn't manage to do twelve, try as I might.

If anyone can manage to do that, then the challenge has been set. Do send us a picture. We don't know exactly how Joshua stacked up the rocks. He might have been a rock stacking expert. But that's not important.

What was important? What was the purpose of this rock memorial? Look at verse six. In the future, when your children ask you, what do these stones mean?

[5:58] 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. So these stones were meant to be a conversation starter. The idea was that future generations would look at them and ask, what are they and what do they mean?

And Hebrew scholars suggest that the question asked by children in verse six in the original text is a very personal one. It's, what do these stones mean to you? So there's a personal connection.

There's a personal experience to share. People are to recount to their children and their grandchildren what God did and what it meant to them personally. So what about you?

Do you have anything in your home to remind you of what God has done in the past? Well, I spoke to Chris Bishop earlier in the week. Chris is sadly leaving to move up to Yorkshire.

[7:00] And I asked him about his memories of his time here in High Wycombe and in Union Baptist Church. And if he had anything to remember, spiritually, his time here at Union Baptist Church. And he shared with me this picture of a cross that Mike had painted for him.

And he's going to take that with him to his new home in Yorkshire and put it up on the wall. And I've got something in my house. We've got several things, but here's one thing that I brought. And this is something that's very personal to Miriam and I.

You probably can't see it so well, but this is a little carving of a Maasai mother and a child. And there's a story behind this that many years ago, Miriam and I had actually been hoping to start a family and something we'd been waiting for and praying about for a long time.

And it seemed that that was an unanswered prayer that we didn't have children. Something we'd been praying for for a long time. And then when we were living in Tanzania, and a friend of ours turned up at our house one day. He was a retiring Australian missionary.

And he was having a clear out. And he said he found this carving of the mother and child. And he said that it seemed like God prompted him to bring it to us and give it to us. So he gave us this carving of this mother and child.

[8:11] And given what we'd been praying for, that kind of, well, it gave us hope. And within two weeks of receiving that gift from our friend, we found out that Miriam was pregnant with our first child, Ben.

So that's something that reminds us that God answers prayers. But who are we to remember when we look back?

We've looked at how they were to remember and why. What about who? Well, did you notice where the stones had to be picked up from in the Jordan River? It was right where the ark was.

It's all about God's presence and God's intervention in the people's history. You know, as we look back and remember things, our memories often get warped and distorted over time.

And we have a tendency when we remember things to actually to make things all about us. Well, later in the chapter in verses 19 to 23, it describes the people actually carrying out the instructions from Joshua.

[9:12] And it says, when your descendants ask their parents, what do these stones mean? Tell them, Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground. For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over.

The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. The Lord your God dried up the Jordan.

Did you notice that? The Lord your God enabled you to cross the Red Sea. It was all about what the Lord had done. It's not about what Joshua had done. It's not about what the priests had done, what the people had done. It's all about what God did.

Many of us have great stories about our past. I love hearing people's stories. I love telling stories.

But when you listen to people's stories, ask yourself the question, who is the hero of this story?

Is it the person who's telling the story? When we tell stories about our past, let's not make it about us. Let's not make ourselves the hero, but let's tell what God has done.

[10:19] Well, what were the people to remember specifically? There's actually some interesting details in this account, if you read on in the chapter, that give a broader perspective on this event.

In verse 19, some details about the timing. This happened on the 10th day of the first month. Now, we read that and it doesn't particularly mean anything to us. But for the Israelites, this was a hugely significant date.

Imagine if I met with you and said, hey, let's arrange to meet for coffee on the 25th of December.

You would immediately say, hang on, that's Christmas Day. So the 10th day of the first month in the Jewish calendar was the day the Israelites prepared the Passover lamb.

It's the day they celebrated the Passover. You can read that in Exodus 12. That date would have been etched in their minds. So they would have seen the link that this happened on that date and they would have seen the link back to God delivering them out of Egypt.

So that was like part one of his deliverance. Taking them out of Egypt. And then this is part two, crossing across the Jordan and now into the Promised Land.

[11:23] So the stone monument served as a reminder to the Israelites of the God who made a way for them to live in a place where they could have peace with God, peace with each other, and peace with the land.

It reminded them of the God who made an impossible, who made a way through an impossible barrier, an impassable barrier. And people hearing the story in years to come, they might ask, did it really happen?

Did this actually happen? Well, the answer would be yes, it did. And here's the stones that once lay on the bed of that enormous river. How else could they have got here? So by his own presence, through the Ark of the Covenant, in that gap, God made a way for the people to pass through.

But how do we remember? What about us? What should we remember? And how do we do that? Well, the Israelites had stones in the ground to come back to.

Stones that were once underneath a mighty river that God stopped so that the people could walk through. We don't have stones in the ground, but we look to a wooden cross which stood in the ground.

[12:37] And we remember that the Son of God himself walked on this earth and trod on the ground that we tread on. And we remember that he stood in that gap, the gap between us and God, the chasm caused by our sin.

And he hung on the cross in that place to make a way for us across the chasm so that we can be reconciled with God. He did the impossible for us.

And how do we remember that? Well, we have the image of the cross and that can be very helpful as a reminder. Some of us might wear a cross as a piece of jewellery.

You might have a cross hanging in your home somewhere as a visual reminder like Chris Bishop had. But actually, just as Joshua was given specific instructions on how to remember, we've been given specific instructions too.

Jesus gave us instructions in Luke 22, verse 19, when Jesus broke bread and shared wine with his friends. And he said, do this in remembrance of me. And that's how we're commanded to remember the greater miracle than the crossing of the Jordan.

[13:49] That the Son of God loved me and gave his life for me on a cross. It's so important that we celebrate communion to remember what God has done for us.

We have opportunities to do that in our online services and I really encourage you to take part in that, even though it might feel a bit strange to do it at home. There's an opportunity to do that here in the sanctuary this evening at our evening service.

I believe there's still places available. You can book online for that this afternoon if you're quick. And as we share communion, it's a conversation starter as we ask each other, what does this mean to you?

It's been said that forgetfulness is the enemy of faith. So we, like the Israelites, need things to help us to remember. Remembering things in the past can help us with what we face right now.

In a moment we're going to hear from Alan Ensink as he remembers an incident from years ago, an incident involving a hat. And remembering that helps Alan face what he's going through now.

[14:52] You know, the Israelites had reached the promised land but they faced many challenges still ahead of them as we'll find out as we continue reading through Joshua. And we face many challenges at this time, don't we?

How do we face these challenges? Well, as we heard from last week, by seeking the presence of God and obeying him and by remembering.

That's so important to face the challenges that we face now, to remember what God has done in the past. Parents, if you're concerned about your children following through with their faith as they get older, it's really important to share family memories.

You need to have conversations about those family memories. Not so much about what you did as a family and what happened but about what God did. Remember his goodness and talk about it as a family.

Just as each of those twelve stones was unique. Each person, each family has a unique story of what God has done for us. We need things to prompt us, to remind us of the story that God has given us and our own family.

[16:00] But at the same time, those twelve stones came together somehow to make a monument for all the people. And so we come with our own individual stories of what God has done for us and we remember what God has done for us all together as we think about the cross and we remember Jesus' sacrifice to us.

We remember that through the bread and the wine. Just as it was impossible to get those twelve stones out of the river without a miracle, we remember that we cannot enter into God's rest.

We cannot enter into a relationship with God to have peace with God without the miracle that he's done personally for us. What do you remember from the past that can help you now?

We'll be thinking that as a church family next week as we look back at God's goodness over the 175 year history of this church. We'll be remembering what God has done.

But also, we can think we can think what can we remember from this time that we're in now from the present in this time of the pandemic that will help us and our children in the future.

[17:06] You may find it helpful to write things down as Sarah suggested earlier to do a journal. You might find it helpful to create a visual reminder. You could make a pile of stones or you could make a mini monument from anything you find at home.

and there's a worksheet on the children's page of our website to guide you into doing that. Perhaps you could spend some time to do that later today as a family and as you're making that memory,

that monument, talk about it.

Let it be a conversation starter with those you're with. You might like to paint a picture or you might like to just put up a Bible verse in your home so that when people see it they can look at that and they can say what does that mean to you?

And you can start a conversation with them. Let's pray. Father God, I thank you for the story of what you did for the Israelite people and the way you worked in their lives, the way you intervened and I thank you that you gave them instructions on how to create a visual reminder of these 12 stones and as we think about those 12 stones we just think about the way that just as all those stones were unique, you work in each of us and each of our families in a unique way and we each have a unique story to tell about what you've done for us and also we think about the stones coming together and we remember that you have worked for all of us in a miraculous way that you have saved us by what Jesus has done on the cross and you've given us a very special way to remember that as well in communion and sharing bread and wine and I pray that you'll help us when we come to share in bread and wine to remember you, to remember your goodness and that that might help us with the challenges that we face right now and we pray also Lord that for what we're going through now Lord you'll show us what it is that you want us to remember and how you want us to remember not so much to remember the things that happen but to remember what you are doing at this time Lord and may that help us and future generations as we share with them in the future. We ask that in Jesus name. Amen.