

## *“Living Stones”*

*Joshua 3:9-4:7*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 27, 2013

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, which must be a pretty big deal because it's one of the ten official federal holidays. Many people in the U.S. get the day off from work or school and many of you, I'm sure, are planning to celebrate by going out to the beach or to the pool. So many people cook out on Memorial Day it's been unofficially called National Bar-B-Q Day. You might like to know that between Memorial Day and Labor Day, Americans will consume about 7 billion hot dogs. That's 818 every second.

But what exactly are we celebrating? Today we tend to view it as the beginning of summer. We consider Memorial Day and Labor Day to be the bookends of the “season of fun.” Maybe it's just another three-day weekend that includes the Indianapolis 500. Sadly, I think many of us have forgotten what Memorial Day is all about.

As its name suggests, Memorial Day is a day for us to remember. We remember the men and women who have died serving our country, defending freedom. Since the founding of our country, 44 million men and women have served in the armed forces and over 660,000 have died in battle. Nearly half of those were in World War II. I think it's a sad irony that too often on Memorial Day we forget to remember.

At 2 a.m. on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Navy battleships began to bombard the tiny island of Iwo Jima in the middle of the South Pacific. Iwo Jima is a tiny speck of an island, only 7 and a half miles long and barely 2 and a half miles wide at its widest point. But during the Second World War the island, with its three airfields and halfway between Tokyo and American-held Guam, was strategically important for both sides. After about an hour the shelling

stopped and 110 bombers appeared overhead to deliver a round of heavy bombing.

Around 9 a.m. American Marines began to land on the beach. What they didn't know was that the heavy bombing had done little to weaken the defenses of the Japanese. You see, the 22,000 Japanese soldiers were not ON the island, but IN the island – in a network of tunnels, caves, and bunkers. Once ashore, the Marines were unable to dig foxholes in the loose volcanic ash. They were sitting ducks for the hidden Japanese gunners. Every Marine, everywhere on the island was always in range of Japanese guns. By sundown that first day 30,000 marines had landed and more than 2400 of them had been wounded or killed. During that first night, the weather turned out to be as tough an enemy as the Japanese. Four-foot waves pounded the beach while the American Marines withstood the continuing Japanese artillery shelling.

For 36 days nearly 100,000 men fought against an enemy they couldn't see. There were no front lines. The Marines were above ground and the Japanese were below them underground. The Marines rarely saw a living Japanese soldier but the Japanese could see the Marines perfectly. The battle for Iwo Jima was won inch by inch and it was costly.

By the time the island was secured on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 25,000 servicemen were wounded and over 6,800 were dead. Iwo Jima was the only battle where American casualties exceeded the Japanese. Over 1/4 of the Medals of Honor awarded to marines in World War II were given for conduct in the invasion of Iwo Jima. Admiral Nimitz said of the men who fought there, “uncommon valor was a common virtue.”

The thousands of Marines on the island began to cheer loudly when a group of Marines reached the summit of Mount Suribachi and raised an American Flag, signaling that they had secured the island. A photograph of that flag-raising is now recognized around the world and has become a symbol of the determination of the Marine Corps.

This image, as many of you know, was also turned into a sculpture for the National Iwo Jima Memorial in Arlington, Virginia. Many of us visit that memorial and the other memorials and monuments in Washington, DC as a way to remember those who gave us the freedoms we enjoy today. In fact, in most places in our country you can find memorials or monuments or simple markers to commemorate people or events that have shaped our history because we don't want to forget.

This is exactly what we find in our passage this morning. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites arrive at the banks of the Jordan River. Moses has died and God has appointed Joshua to take Moses' place as leader. Joshua's job is to finally lead the people into the Promised Land.

There are three things I want us to see in this passage. First of all is God's promise to His people. In 3:9 Joshua tells the Israelites, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God." Joshua then explains that the people will know that God is among them because of the mighty sign God will perform by parting the waters. In this passage we find the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 of land. We also find God reminding Moses of this promise by promising to deliver the Israelites from Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land, "into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

But there is another promise from God here. The promise that God makes to His

people camped on the banks of the Jordan River is the same promise He made to Moses and the same promise He makes to every one of us. God says, "I will be with you." We find that promise fulfilled when God comes to dwell with His people in and as Jesus Christ. We also find God's promise to be with us confirmed in the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, which we celebrated week. You see, as Jesus Christ dwells within us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we know and understand that God is truly with us. We are living in the Promised Land.

I just want to point out, however, that the Promised Land is not paradise. When the Israelites arrive in the Promised Land it's still filled with violence and death and numerous struggles. While it's not paradise, it's where God wants them to be, troubles and all. The same is true for our own lives. As we walk with Christ every day we are in the Promised Land but we're not yet in paradise. When our time is finished in this land *then* we will be taken to paradise.

As part of these promises, Joshua prepares the tribes to expect victory. The miracle of the parting of the river will be a sign to them that God will give them victory in the land, but they need to expect it. As one commentator put it, "God delivers wonders to those who expect them." So, too, *we* should expect to see God do amazing things in *our* midst. Maybe it's a healed loved one, or a marriage that's saved, or someone who decides to trust Jesus as their Lord and savior.

The second thing I want us to see in this passage is the response that was required by the Israelites – *trust*. The passage makes a point to explain that the river was at flood stage. While it may have been possible for an individual to cross, it would have been impossible for a large caravan of people, animals and equipment to cross. It also would have been impossible to cross

carrying the Ark of the Covenant. But God commands that the priests who carry the Ark step into the river first. Unlike the crossing of the Red Sea, where the water parted allowing the Israelites to pass through, here the priests had to trust God by getting into the high water before the water level began to drop. We're not told how long this took, but we read that as soon as the priests' feet touched the river, the water stopped flowing "a great distance away," so it must have taken some time for the water in the river to drain away. The priests and the people had to trust that even though it didn't look like God was doing anything, even though there wasn't the display of power like there had been at the Red Sea crossing, God was in fact with them and that He was going to deliver them safely across to the Promised Land.

Our lives are no different. In 2 Corinthians 5:6, Paul says, "as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight." In his letter to the Colossians, Paul said, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." The water of baptism serves to remind us of God's promise to be with us and our response is to trust Him.

The third thing I want us to see in today's passage is the memorial that the Israelites set up. In the history of Israel, the crossing of the Jordan River was remembered as one of the key events in their history, second only to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. At the command of the LORD, Joshua instructs the twelve men to pick up a large stone from the middle of the river, from the place where the priests stood holding the Ark,

and to set them up on the other side as a memorial.

The practice of standing up stones as a memorial was somewhat common in the ancient near east. In 1 Samuel 7:12 we read that when God rescued the Israelites from the Philistines Samuel took a stone and set it up. He called it Ebenezer, which in Hebrew literally means "stone of help." The stone was to remind the people how God had delivered them from their attackers and so it reminded them to turn to the LORD.

Joshua tells the Israelites, these stones are 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. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." The Ebenezer stone represented a fresh beginning, a reversal of course for God's people. It also said something important about God: His mercies are everlasting and his covenant is forever.

I think you and I probably need to set up a few standing stones, Ebenezers, in our lives to remind us of the wonderful things God has done for us. For us, maybe the standing stone is not a physical stone but something that shows other people what God has done for us. Perhaps our standing stones are the priorities we make or the words we use to speak to other people. We need to be reminded that we are forgiven and that God has promised to be with us. But there's something else we need to understand. We have been united with Christ. We are now a new creation. When people see our lives, they should be moved to say, "what happened here?" And then you get to tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you. For some people, you may be the only Bible they read this week.

So this Memorial Day, I encourage you to enjoy the holiday. Enjoy your cookout or

whatever you have planned. But some time during the day, pause to remember those who sacrificed their lives to give us that opportunity. And I also encourage you to

BE the memorial to what God has done and promises to do.

*Amen*