

“Living Stones”

1 Peter 2:1-10 • Joshua 3:9-4:7

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 24, 2020

Besides being what seems like the 85th day of March, tomorrow is Memorial Day. After being stuck at home for the last couple of months I can tell you lots of people are planning to celebrate by going out to the beach or to the pool. Our beaches are always crowded on Memorial Day but this year it looks like there will be record crowds. So many people cook out on Memorial Day it's been unofficially called National Bar-B-Q Day. One interesting fact is that between Memorial Day and Labor Day, Americans will consume about 7 billion hot dogs. That's 818 every second.

But what exactly is everyone 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.” Sadly, I think many of us have forgotten what Memorial Day is all about.

As its name suggests, Memorial Day isn't meant to be a celebration. It's a day for us to remember. We remember the men and women who have died serving our country, defending freedom. I think it's a sad irony that too often on Memorial Day we forget to remember. Since the founding of our country, over 1.3 million men and women serving in our armed forces have died in battle. Since this year marks 75 years since the end of World War II, I think it's a good time for us to remember that over 400,000 Americans lost their lives in that war. One of the most memorable battles was the invasion of Iwo Jima.

At 2 a.m. on February 19th, 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 26th, 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.

So why am I talking about Iwo Jima and this photo of the flag raising? Because this image, as many of you know, was also turned into a sculpture for the National Iwo Jima Memorial in

Arlington, Virginia. Memorials like the Iwo Jima Memorial help us 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. We put up memorials because we don't want to forget.

This is exactly what we find in our reading from Joshua. 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.

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 maybe you and I probably need to set up a few standing stones, Ebenezers, in our lives to remind us and to tell others of the wonderful

things God has done for us. Instead of actual stones, however, maybe for you and me the standing stone is not a physical stone but something that shows other people what God has done for us. I think this is what Peter is saying when he says that we are "like living stones." Instead of "standing up" a stone, you *are* the stone. YOU are the memorial that reminds people what God has done and promises to do.

Peter says beginning in verse 9, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Then in verse 10 he says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." When people see your life, when they hear you speak or watch how you treat people, do they see and hear mercy? Does your life reflect God's marvelous light? Does your attitude proclaim the excellencies of God?

Perhaps our standing stones are the priorities we make or the words we use to speak to other people. As Peter says, our memorial stones should be things like putting away *all* malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander. Guess what – that's hard. So 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. But we must grow into it. So Peter says in verse 2 that the way to do that is to long for what he calls "pure spiritual milk." What he's saying is that the way to get rid of things like malice and deceit and envy is to begin to replace them with more of Jesus in our lives. As you begin to become more like Christ people will notice. They will see that you are not like you used to be. Then, like those ancient standing stones, when people see your changed life, they will 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. More importantly, I also encourage you to BE the memorial to what God has done and promises to do.

Amen.