

Today we conclude the last of our final summer sermon series entitled, "The Problem of Christian Nationalism: What Are We Passing On?"

Today's scripture comes from the Book of Joshua. Let's back up to review the story so far. God chose Abraham (Father Abraham had many sons...) and his family became the people of Israel through twelve tribes, who are then enslaved in Egypt. God utilized Moses to rescue them out of Egypt by parting the waters of the Red Sea. God made a covenant with them, the Ten Commandments, at Mt. Sinai and brought them through the wilderness. During the end of their forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites camped right outside the promised land and Moses called them to obey God's commands so that they could show all the other nations what God was like. Moses died before they reached the promised land and this is where the Book of Joshua picks up. Joshua is newly appointed as Israel's leader- the new Moses- and he leads them into the Promised Land. Joshua first sends spies into the land and once there's an all clear, he then leads all of Israel across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. Just like the sea parted for Moses in Egypt, so here the river parts for Joshua and the priests carry the Ark of the Covenant across leading all of Israel with them (The Bible Project, Tim Mackie). Before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first **PRAY. READ.**

The people of God are called to remember. To remember how good God is, how God maintains his purposes and keeps his promises. Biblical reminding is not nostalgia. It is remembering rightly. Israel is not told to remember how powerful they were. They are told to remember what

God had done. Christian nationalism can turn memory into mythology; a sanitized story of a supposedly Christian nation. The biblical story is much more complicated: slavery, exile, oppression, injustice- and a God who repeatedly hears the cry of the vulnerable. The Israelites are called to remember God by tying the word on their wrists and putting it on their doorposts. Here in Joshua we have twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, which are to be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. Yet, we are, by nature, a forgetful people. “And what is true of us as individuals is true of us as a nation. Forgetfulness is the cause of all kinds of trouble” (Sam Perry, Center for Excellence in Preaching). When we water down or falsely tell or just plain try to erase the story of a people, this is troubling on many levels and creates unnecessary fear in lieu of faith. History has a habit of repeating herself, as do generations within families and the way they show up in this world and treat one another and others. This is one of the many reasons why we need community and accountability. “The remembering part is done in the intergenerational community, as parents tell and retell to children and grandchildren what is most prized in community lore” (Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*). My daughter Bailey introduced me to an educational song parody of Taylor Swift’s song, *Trouble*, called *Treble*, this week. It is used to teach music and band students how to learn the notes in the treble clef: FACE and Every Good Boy Does Fine. I was reminded of learning the same thing when I was in middle school band. She showed me another song to learn the state capitals and another one to learn the countries in this world. “I wish I had these when I was your age!” I told her. Many of us learn pneumatic devices to

assist us in remembering all sorts of things from names to phone numbers (but with phones, not much anymore) to dates to multiplication facts and vocabulary words. "Israel long has recognized the need to remember. So God has at various points in redemptive history had his people place markers as memorials in order to remind the people of God's mighty deeds. That is the case here in Joshua 4. God wants to ensure that God's people will never forget what He has done. This is not the first time God has asked Israel to remember. After God rescues them from the Passover and from Egypt, God says, 'When your children ask you what this means, tell them this...' You can find this call to remember in Deuteronomy, Ecclesiastes, and here in Joshua. This theme of remembering is then picked up in the New Testament as Paul says to Timothy, 'Remember Jesus Christ.' In 2 Peter we're reminded, 'It is right to refresh your memory...' And of course our Lord Jesus Christ as he broke bread and gave it to His disciples said, 'Do this in remembrance of me...' (Perry). Remembering is important to us as people of faith.

Children ask lots of questions. As both a parent and a pastor, I've gotten asked some doozies over the years- questions that range from "When are we going to get there?" to "When do we get to eat the bread and drink the juice?" "Where do babies come from?" "Where does God live?" "Who made God?" "How can Jesus be in my heart when he is up in heaven?" "How long 'til this sermon is over?" "Why do people sit down and stand up so much?" "When can we go?" Some of my greatest foundation for my faith was formed through not only being allowed to

ask questions but also through song. “Jesus loves the little children all the children of the world: red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in God’s sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” And “God’s got the whole world in God’s hands, He’s got the whole world in his hands, God’s got the whole world in God’s hands, He’s got the whole world in his hands.” “Love, love, love, love, the gospel in one word is love. Love your neighbors as yourself for God is love.” My grandparents and my parents passed down their faith through their words, songs and actions. I watched, and I listened, and I absorbed much more than I ever realized. A friend and colleague of mine, who does not have children of her own, told a story this week of a time when she was serving as a youth pastor at a church in Florida. She said that the baptismal font looked marble, but it was plastic and one of the youth- upon discovering this- thought the font would make an excellent frisbee and took it outside to test it out. My friend turned around and as soon as she recognized the font being thrown as a frisbee, she went ballistic. After safely retrieving the font, she began to calm down and sat the young people down, sharing with them about baptism and why she was freaking out as they played with something so sacred. She can laugh now, but she wasn’t laughing then. While my friend might have not chosen this exact way to talk about the importance of baptism, she seized the opportunity. Just as these 12 stones were and are an opportunity to talk about faith in ways that you may not have otherwise thought about. When our children ask, “What do you believe?” What will our lives tell them- even when we mess up- because we will?

“What do these stones mean to you?” Joshua describes in detail the answer that should be given as well as the purpose they are to give it. Isn’t it interesting that in our culture we’ve adopted this idea that every question is important, especially if we are the ones asking it. “In our fallen-ness we want to dictate both the questions that are really important and the answers that please us. But God’s word in some way presses us, challenges us. God’s word tells us the important questions. The answer to the question, ‘What does it mean?’ isn’t ‘Whatever you want it to mean.’ While that is a beloved answer in our postmodern context, it isn’t a biblical answer, and it isn’t the answer we are given in God’s word. The stones mean something” (Perry). Joshua tells us the answer: God dried up the river Jordan before them until they crossed over just as God had dried up the Red Sea when God rescued his people from Egypt. So the people of God are to tell their children what God has done and the uniqueness of what God has done. And not just to their children- but to the whole world so that the nations, too, may know the hand of the Lord is mighty. If we don’t tell our children and their children about what God has done, they will learn something else. They will inherit a story. What story will it be? Will it be a story of a God who blesses us or a God who blesses the world? Will it be a story where Christianity is seen as a weapon or where it is seen as a way of love? Will it be a story where American is God’s chosen nation or where Christ is Lord of every nation? Will it be a story where faith means protecting our privilege or loving our neighbor?

I had the privilege of going to hear Mavis Staples at the beginning of this

month in Asheville. I was most impressed- not just by her age at 87- but by her faith that shone so brightly through her. I felt like I had been to church! One of the songs she sang was “We Shall Not Be Moved”- the song the choir just sang. When I heard it, I immediately thought of this sermon series and of her words: “We shall not be moved. Just like a tree that’s planted by the water. We shall not be moved. We’re fighting for our future, we shall not be moved.” One of the choir members noted yesterday that in our music, there is an asterisk by the word “future.” The note indicated that you could substitute “children” with “future.” “We’re fighting for our children, we shall not be moved. We’re young and old together, we shall not be moved. The whole world is watching, we shall not be moved.” What story will our faith tell in the generations to come?

“The Ark of the Covenant is the sign of God’s presence and power, and purpose. It contained the law of God, framed by the mercy seat, symbolizing both the justice and the mercy of God. Just as the Ark of the Covenant represents the power and presence of God, we know that is most clearly seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So for the people of Israel to look to the ark is for us, this side of the cross, to look to Christ Jesus, because the way we know the invisible God in human form is ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith” (Perry). As Christians we’re called to follow Jesus by loving God with everything we’ve got and by loving our neighbors as ourselves. At the risk of oversaturation, I want to share how much more I have learn about what Dolly Parton has passed on in her death than in

her life. No, she and her husband, Carl, did not have children of their own; however, they had lots of children in their lives. Due to Dolly's dad being illiterate when she was growing up, Dolly wanted to do something to pass on the gift of reading to children so in 1995 she started small in her hometown county in TN. But then her Imagination Library began to expand until it currently has given out over 3 million books to children from birth to 5 years old- in different places all over the world-one book a month mailed to the children. Talk about a legacy and yet...that's the thing...it's not about Dolly. It's about something bigger. It's about her faith. I saw a post this week that read, "Dolly Parton was a Christian who didn't use her religion to control and condemn others, but to welcome them, love them, and be generous to them. She didn't wear her religion as an arrogant status symbol. She just loved people. She was a talented, brilliant, and caring person who led with love." When asked in an interview why she was the way she was Dolly said, "I always ask God to work through me and let me be a light of some kind and help in this world." What are we passing on to the next generation and the generations to come? I hope they will say, "These are the stones of a people who learned that God is not ours to possess. These are the stones of a people who remembered who and who they are. These are the stones of a people who chose love over fear, truth over mythology, and neighbor over nation. These are the stones of a people who tried, imperfectly, to follow Jesus." "This little light of mine, I'm going let it shine..." I recently came across this quote from Christian author, teacher and former member of the Southern Baptist denomination, Beth Moore. "Christian nationalism isn't the way ahead for Jesus followers. Christian

faithfulness is. It's fidelity to Christ- not fidelity to notions of American Christianity or to any political party- that will bring light into this present darkness. The church is bride to no one but Christ" (Living Proof Ministries). May it be so for generations to come. Amen and amen!