

November 25, 2018

Christ the King Sunday

Joshua 4: 1-8, 19-24

Prayer: Dear Lord, go with us into this last day of the church year. Help us to understand your Holy Word and to remember it. In the name of Jesus Christ our King, Amen.

These Stones

I spent Thanksgiving week the way I have for many years now – writing Triune’s Christmas cards. If you don’t get one, you can let us know. It means you have managed to keep your address a secret from us.

It is a great irony that I spend a week on Christmas cards.

Because when I was growing up, I heard my mother complain every year because she had to address all these cards to my dad’s work colleagues -- whom she didn’t even know. I vowed I would *never* send Christmas cards.

And I didn’t. I remember a friend saying one time, “No one *likes* sending Christmas cards. But I never knew anyone who refused to do it.”

I said, “Well, now you do.”

And then lo and behold, I came to Triune. And our staff member David Gay came up with the idea to have a Triune artist create a card and send it out to thank the people who had supported us all year. And to include a return envelope as a soft “ask” for continued support.

So there I sit all week on my sofa, surrounded by cards and stamps and envelopes and lists, drinking hot chocolate and watching bad movies and reruns of *Murphy Brown*.

And I remember.

As I go down the list, I remember people who have worshiped with us, people who have volunteered with us, people who have given so generously to us, people who have given so sacrificially to us.

And rather than a burden, the week of card signing has become a really special time of the year.

For remembering. For thanksgiving.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year. Before I began to lead worship every Sunday, I couldn't have told you there was a church year.

But there is. It ends today with Christ the King Sunday. And the new year begins next week with Advent, a period of waiting for the birth of Christ.

During Advent and Christmas, we will return to stories and Scripture that I hope you remember from your childhood. Because the very nature of religion, of Christianity, involves remembering.

One of my seminary professors used to say, "We are always one generation away from losing Christianity altogether."

In other words, if we don't tell our stories, if we don't pass them on, they will die.

It is important that we as Christians remember who we are. We must go back, again and again, to the reason, the purpose for why we are in this place, in this time. Why out of all the religions in the marketplace, out of all the streams of human thought over the past 2,000 years, why we chose to follow the God who came to us as Jesus Christ.

Because that memory can keep us going in the hard times.

That memory can sustain us when we don't know why God isn't more present or active or visible in our lives. Even if it is we ourselves who have created the breach, who have created a situation where we don't feel God's presence or activity or visibility, it is valuable to remember a time when we did feel it.

In a few minutes, we are going to read from one of my favorite books of the Bible, the Old Testament history of *Joshua*. The hero of this book is the great military figure Joshua who took over as leader of Israel when Moses died.

As Charity sang for us, Moses led the nation out of slavery in Egypt, and God parted the Red Sea for them to escape. But then Israel's whining and disobedience angered God, and he had them wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

Moses was not allowed to lead his people into the land of Canaan. That job fell to Joshua, and going into Canaan would involve a string of military battles, starting with Jericho. And in an echo of what had happened back in Egypt, God parted the waters of the Jordan River – at flood stage -- for the people to cross.

But before the first battle, the Lord asked the people to do something else. He asked them to pause for a moment. And remember.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Joshua 4: 1-8**.

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ²Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³and 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." '

⁴Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵Joshua 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, ⁶so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" ⁷then 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 for ever.'

⁸ The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there.

Crossing the Jordan River itself was an act of remembrance. It recalled how their ancestors crossed the Red Sea 40 years earlier. Now Israel's God was gearing up once more, parting the waters of the Jordan River so the Israelites could push westward into enemy territory.

Only now, God instructs Joshua to pause from the doing, and take time to reflect, to remember. A man from each of the 12 tribes picked up a stone from the dry riverbed and took it to a site on the west side of the river. There they piled the stones into a makeshift monument at a campsite called Gilgal.

Let's continue reading **Joshua 4: 19-24**.

19 The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.²⁰ Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, ²¹saying to the Israelites, 'When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean?' ²²then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground."

²³For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, ²⁴so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever.'

When your children ask their parents "What do these stones mean?" you shall tell them "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground."

In a time when God might *not* be performing the big dramas, might *not* be parting waters, the children and their parents would remember a time when he did.

In a time when the people might *not* feel the presence of God, when they might feel tired and forlorn and abandoned, they could look at those stones and recall a time when he parted the waters so they could walk across.

This piling of stones occurred before the first battle was ever fought. It was a ceremony to pause and gather breath, to prepare for the ordeals ahead.

We're going up against mighty Jericho and then all these nations who are already settled in Canaan? Tell me again why we are doing that?

We are doing it because we serve an even mightier God, a God who parts waters. *Oh yeah. We remember.*

As the book of Joshua continues, the power of the memory grows, too. Soon it has spread beyond the children of Israel. The first verse of the next chapter reads: **“When all the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them....”** (Joshua 5: 1)

So these stones became a reminder to everyone else, too. *You don't mess with God's people.*

Twenty-two years ago, before Nicholas Sparks was NICHOLAS SPARKS, he lived in Simpsonville. And he wrote a novel called *The Notebook*. It was the story of a woman in a nursing home with Alzheimer's.

Every day her husband would read to her from a notebook about their lives together – how they'd fallen love in the 1940s and her rich parents separated them, how he went off to fight in World War II, how they re-united after seven years apart.

As the husband read the notebook every day in the nursing home, he and his wife would live through each day in that previous time, in the stories of their lives together back in the '40s.

But at the end of the day, all those stories, all those memories, would flee from the wife's mind. And the next morning the husband would start all over again with the story of how they'd

fallen love and how her rich parents separated them, how he went off to fight in World War II, how they'd re-united after seven years apart.

For who was he if he weren't her husband?

And who was she if she couldn't remember being his wife?

What are we without our memories? Who are we without our memories? What is our Christian faith if we don't constantly touch base with its history, its tenets, its stories?

During Advent, we will sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" that Christians have been singing since the ninth century. And I will tell the story of our Christmas tree that was designed specifically for Triune in the 21st century. It is the way we remember our traditions as we wait in the darkest part of the year for the light to come.

Our communion table is carved with these words: *This do in remembrance of me.* On the first Sunday of each month, we deliberately pause and re-enact a ritual so that we might remember what that light did for us. It is our theology in a nutshell. "The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you."

In those 14 short words, in the eating of Nikki Day's baked wheat bread, in the drinking of grape juice brought by Loaves and Fishes and poured by Rick Garvais, we touch base with the core of our belief. Jesus' body broken for us. Jesus' blood shed for us.

We remember what he did. We remember why we're here.

In the very last book of our Holy Scripture, Revelation, we are reminded of the mighty sweep of Christian history: "**I am the Alpha and the Omega,**" says the Lord God, **who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.**" (Rev. 1: 8)

Without remembering, we have no theology.

Without remembrance, we have no religion.

“When your children ask their parents in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’ ”

When your children ask, who’s that baby in that barn with all those animals?

When they ask, who are those people in bathrobes?

When they ask, why are those kings kneeling down?

Will you know how to answer? For that is how we pass our faith and our beliefs on from generation to generation. That is how we ensure Christianity won’t die on our watch – because we tell our stories.

Remember that during Advent when you think, *I cannot believe she is talking about those shepherds again.*

Today is Christ the King Sunday. The day when we reach the end of the church year and shout, *Yes, he is the king.* He is our king.

Throughout this year, we have heard about Jesus being born as a baby in a stable,

Speaking to his elders in the temple,

Being baptized by John,

Calling his disciples,

Healing and teaching and exorcising demons,

Being spit upon and struck and mocked

Being crucified. Being resurrected.

Despite all that would seem to cry otherwise, he became our reigning king.

When our children ask who we serve and why, let us remember.

Let us remember to tell them of a king who never lived in a palace, but who was born and lived and died right here among us.

Christ the King.

Amen.