

“We Are Not Alone”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Scripture: Joshua 4:1-7

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord, as we hear and think about your word to us today, we pray for inspiration and guidance from the Holy Spirit, that we might become instruments in your hand. This we pray in the name of Jesus our Lord Amen.*

I don't know if you are aware of it or not, but the Bible Study recommended for the Circles – or the Presbyterian Women – for this year is the Old Testament Book of Joshua. Now I have heard some people say they really like this study, but I have probably heard more people say, they really DON'T like this study. Be that as it may, though, as Carole Anne Agnew, Marion Yongue and I talked about the emphasis of our stewardship campaign for this year, the Old Testament book of Joshua seemed to be saying something very important.

Joshua is the personal name of the main character of the book of Joshua. According to the new Bible Dictionary, the word's basic meaning is “salvation”. While the book of Joshua is about the person Joshua, this does not mean that it was written by Joshua. Rather, it is likely that the book of Joshua is actually a “composite” book. The Joshua narrative tells us of the events of that movement and settling of the Israelites into the Promised Land.

In the book of Joshua, God is pictured in a very personal relationship with Joshua. The Lord addresses Joshua directly, with words of instruction and encouragement. Now, you have to understand that this wasn't any more normal an occurrence in Joshua's time than it is in ours. And while there are portions of the book of Joshua which describe fierce battles between the Israelites and the inhabitants of Canaan, the

initial entry into the land is pictured in a rather peaceful, almost liturgical manner.

As instructed by God, Joshua selects one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to carry stones to be used in erecting an altar. While the details of this account are not entirely clear, we do learn that twelve stones from the middle of the river were taken to a place called Gilgal and used for an altar. The Ark of the Covenant was then brought to that place. With this action, the connection between the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan is made clear.

So what's that all about? Why do you think Joshua was told to have the people gather stones and build them into an altar? Is it possible, do you think, that a stone represented more than just a useless piece of rock? What if a stone was a timeless, visible reminder of a peoples' life-changing encounter with Almighty God? For Joshua and the children of Israel, this was the case twelve times over as they crossed the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land. Twelve strong men shouldered the weight of twelve great stones as this new nation walked through a miracle. And when that special moment in time was over, the stones remained as witness to the day when a people walked with God between the waters – and lived!

You likely remember the story in Matthew's gospel when Jesus says to his mostly male audience, “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?” The answer appears pretty obvious, doesn't it? Any decent parent would be quick to respond: “I love my child; I wouldn't give him a stone!” Only a cruel, twisted mind would think of giving a child a useless piece of rock when his little stomach is empty. The point of the question is clear: you and I can depend on our Heavenly Father to meet our needs.

What If we could speak symbolically of a stone as the “souvenir” of God's divine involvement in our human experience? What if we could use the word “stone” with the meaning Joshua found in it? Perhaps Jesus would not mind if we took another look at his apparently rhetorical question.

You see, this is a question of greatest importance for us today: Bread, or stones? Our children ask for bread. That is, they have physical needs like adults, but they aren't able to meet these needs by themselves. They depend on you and me – they trust you and me – to provide what they need. Jesus expects that, as parents, we will provide.

But as we read in the book of Joshua, children also ask about stones. Their hunger for food and physical nourishment is often equaled, and occasionally surpassed, by their curiosity and hunger for spiritual understanding. And again they depend on, and trust, you and me to provide

Surely, parents must meet the physical needs of their children. Boys and girls must be fed and clothed and housed. Nothing is so disturbing as a mother or father who does not fulfill this obligation, - who abuses this sacred trust. And nothing is more pitiful than the despair of a mother or father who does not have the means to feed his or her children, or treat their illnesses, or give them a home. And the world – perhaps now more than any other time besides the Great Depression of the 1930's – has far too many parents in both categories.

Some of you here this morning likely are of that generation which provided the needed bread to your children during the Depression, when many could not even feed themselves. Others of you watched parents work long and hard to provide the barest of necessities. A still new generation has grown up with parents whose attitudes and values were shaped by those years of uncertainty and sacrifice. For most of us,

then, there is a strong commitment to giving our children what we couldn't have – to giving the “bread”: meeting their material requirements – and their wants. We also pay a lot of attention to their social needs, and their educational needs, and their psychological and emotional needs. We bend over backwards and go the second (and third) mile to insure that our sons and daughters experience the best of everything our efforts and our incomes can provide.

And yet, the words of Jesus seem to echo in the recesses of our minds: “Man does not live by bread alone.” Bread is important – yes. But it is not *all-important*. Do you remember the setting of those words from Jesus? He had gone into the wilderness, not eating for many days. Then he faced a battle of wills with Satan who said, “Why don't you turn these stones into bread?” Stones aren't important, are they? They're just rocks. Do away with them. Ignore them and direct all your attention and energy to making bread.”

Now the land of Israel is not a very big place; maybe about the size of New Hampshire. And as Jesus went up into its mountainous wilderness, struggling with Satan's great temptations, he could look out over the miles to the Jordan River, just as some of you may have scanned the distant horizon from a Mount Washington, or a Lookout Mountain, or a Pike's Peak. He could have looked out over the Jordan River which flowed along to the south past a little village called Gilgal. And perhaps (being a Jew and well versed in the sacred scriptures) Jesus remembered at that moment the times when he asked his father, Joseph, or read in the family Bible as we have done today: “What do these stones mean?” And Jesus said to Satan, “Bread isn't everything!”

While you and I work hard to put bread on our tables, are we ignoring or neglecting or shortchanging our spiritual needs? God had Joshua erect that monument of stones, not for the

people who crossed the Jordan that day, but for their children, and for the children who would follow after them, generation by generation – a testament to the fact that God is with us – we are not alone.

As we gather here in this place this week and next week – as we think about how we might support the mission of ministry here at First Church – what sort of monument do we need to remind ourselves of God's continued presence with us? In these hard economic times, when we are worried about “putting bread on our tables”, what do we need to remind us that bread is important, but it is not all important?

Bread, my friends, is perishable; stone, on the other hand, is not. Bread meets the need of the moment while the kind of stone we are talking about meets the needs of eternity. “Stone” suggests substance and strength and security. In a few minutes, we will be singing “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” I wouldn't be surprised if you have wondered about the words in the second verse, “Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come...” What the heck is an Ebenezer, anyway?

The word Ebenezer comes from Hebrew and is actually two words pronounced together, and literally speaking, an Ebenezer is a “stone of help”, or a reminder of God's real, Holy Presence and Divine aid. This morning as we celebrate God's presence with us and our commitment to Him and our brothers and sisters in the world, let us, as well, remember and share that God is with us – We are not alone. Amen and Amen.

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