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Title: A Memorial Forever

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Scripture: [Psalm 105:1-11](#)

Text: [Joshua 4:1-7](#)

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Here we are on Memorial Day weekend and let's start with a question. I've asked it a couple of times this past week, practicing what I will ask you. In its original forms, the question used the adjectives of best or favorite. I was quickly told that it was a poor word choice. So I will try it this way. What memorial monument is the most

meaningful for you? What comes to mind?

We are a nation and a city of monuments, many of which are iconic. The Statue of Liberty, Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial are world famous. None of those were mentioned in the Bible studies I led, when I asked, "What is your favorite monument?" The most popular answer was the Viet Nam War memorial in Washington, D. C. although again, popular doesn't seem to be the right word. Moving, inspirational, or meaningful is better. There is something inspiring and meaningful about the 58,000 names inscribed on that wall, and it is very moving to watch individuals trace names in order to remember. Another answer was the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and I agree, it is inspirational.

Last fall, Ann and I went to the 9/11 memorial in New York City. It is a powerful experience, one which connected us with all of the emotions of that day and the weeks following. But for me, I don't think it is the most meaningful. The USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor moved me the most. My father was a Pearl Harbor survivor and to be there and remember that he was there and survived brought me to tears. It will remain for me a memorial forever etched in my memory.

It is the purpose of memorials: to remember and respect those who have died, those whose days are gone. Whether it is a memorial for soldiers and sailors on a circle or a family cemetery just down the street from the church, the purpose of the stones are for us to remember, to let the stones speak.

Have you ever been to a Jewish cemetery? Ever notice the headstone erected on the grave of a Jewish man or woman? Instead of flowers, you may have seen stones carefully placed on top of the grave marker. These stones have a specific, commemorative meaning, a meaning that binds that individual person to the whole history of Israel. They are stone testaments to the ongoing relationship between God and every son or daughter of Israel. If you remember the movie Schindler's List, you know what I am talking about.¹

Our lesson today may well be the origin of using stones to remember. In the 4th chapter of Joshua, the wandering Israelites are facing one final barrier of their 40 year walk to the Promise Land. But it is no small bump in the road. Between them and their greatest hope and dreams is the raging Jordan River. It appears to be an insurmountable obstacle.

God gives Joshua specific instructions. The priests are to pass among the twelve tribes and then, walk to the edge of the fast moving Jordan. There God will perform the miracle that all but two, Caleb and Joshua, had only heard of. God was going to part water again and promised that "When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord...the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap" (Joshua 3: 13) They do and God does. Just like the parting of the Red Sea, God parts the Jordan, creating dry ground downstream from the ark-bearing priests. As they continue to stand midstream, the entire nation of Israel crosses safely into the Promise Land.

It is an incredible event, worth memorializing. So God tells Joshua to have one man from each of the 12 tribes select a stone from the dry riverbed and carry it onto into the Promise Land. There, at the place that became Gilgal, whose name means "Stone Circle," the stones were carefully set up, a memorial, a monument to commemorate God's intervention. The purpose was to remember. "When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the Ark of the CovenantSo these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." (Joshua 4:5-7)

A memorial forever--God knows how important it is to remember. Throughout scripture, God is continually calling us to remember. God calls Israel to remember the covenant when in his old age, God vowed to Abraham to "... multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." (Exodus 32:13)

God wants Israel to "remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 5:15).

When God gives the Law, God says, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8)

God creates the Passover and says "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." (Exodus 12:14)

The Psalmist summed up the message well when he wrote: "Remember the wonderful works that God has done God's great deed ..." (Psalm 105:5)

God so believes in memorial remembering that God "...appointed a law in Israel, to teach to their children;... so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (Psalm 78:5b-7) It is not surprising then that God had Joshua build a memorial for teaching children when they ask, "What do these stones mean?"

Why is there such an emphasis on remembering? Memory embraces God's actions in the past and shapes future behavior. God even creates His own memorial, a rainbow. Remembering is even important for God. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." (Genesis 9:13, 15b) The rainbow reminds God of His past action and shapes God's future behavior.

Even though this Memorial Day weekend is not expressly religious, it does promote a value that is held by God, the importance of remembering. God knows that a failure of memory is spiritually dangerous and it can lead to a failure of faith. Forgetfulness erodes the foundation of our relationship with God.

Those who forget the past fall into thanklessness. They forget the value of our heritage and the source of our blessings. When this happens, it becomes very easy to take for granted all that you have and all that you are. Far too quickly, you begin to believe that you can make your own way without God. Then in your wrong-headed self-confidence you will lose our way. For this reason it is crucial that we remember.²

Did you know this is one of the main purposes of worship? As Christians, we are always held to our faith by memory. We gather each in worship to do just that--to remember God's love and the gift of Jesus. The most significant

thing happening today is the fact that by symbols-- prayer, songs, solos and the Word, even the cross, we remember Jesus, his teachings, his life, death and resurrection. We must not forget; we are to remember, to remember the wonders of the past so that our lives will be open to the even greater wonders God will do for us in the future.

Our memorial is this the table, the Lord's Supper which understands the past and anticipates the future. It does not falsely glorify the past. When we partake of the bread and cup we remember the broken body and blood of the Lord. Images of deceit, betrayal and cruelty impose themselves upon us. The memorial feast confronts us with the disquieting fact that we humans are all too capable of striking out against one another. In many ways it is like the terrible memorials of pain and loss, like the Viet Nam wall, the 9/11 memorial, the USS Arizona. That is not the kind of memory we hold dear. But the Lord's Supper does more. It reminds us of the sacrificial love of God. It speaks to us of a love that will not let us go but which reaches out to us, despite our evil actions and intent.

Yet in the Lord's Supper we see even more than that. We also see the promise of Jesus Christ that He will come again and that we will eat and drink anew with our Lord in the kingdom of God. The Lord's Supper points us not only to the past but toward the promised future as well. The meal is a memorial that reinforces a hopeful memory.

With Memorial Day upon us, it is proper to think of the past and of those who have gone from this world. But for those of us who are Christians, this is not exclusively an exercise in looking behind and dwelling upon what has been. For we believe in the wondrous life to come for those people of faith who have already died. We live in light of the resurrection and we believe that death will not be the end. It is the ultimate memorial forever, for it anticipates the memorial meal which never ends, the banquet feast in heaven.

In 1969, Clarence Jordan died of a heart attack. As some of you know, Jordan was the author of the Cotton Patch Version of the Bible and was the founder of Koinonia Farms, in 1942, an inter-racial community and innovative ministry in rural Georgia. It was a very successful ministry but received lots vicious opposition from many of the racists in his area during the 50s and 60s. He added a ministry in the last year of his life, to establish affordable housing. It became what we know today as Habitat for Humanity. When Jordan died, the local coroners and undertakers were of little help, still holding racial grudges. Jordan was buried in a plain cedar box on a hillside on his farm. Not surprising, Millard Fuller, the president of Habitat for Humanity, officiated at the funeral. Just after the casket was lowered into

the ground and the grave was filled, an unexpected thing happened. Fuller's two-year-old daughter stepped up to the grave and began to sing the only song the little girl knew.

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, dear Clarence
Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday at a funeral? How strange and yet how truly appropriate. For when a Christian dies, it is a birthday of a sorts because death is not an ending but a new beginning. ³

And so on this Memorial Day weekend, when we think of those who have gone before us, those who has sacrificed their lives in service of country, even those loved ones we have lost recently or in many years past, let us do so with a hopeful memory for an amazing future they receive and awaits us. We know this because of our memorial, offered on a cross by Jesus and remembered at his table. It is a memorial forever.

¹ Stone Testaments, Leonard Sweet, from ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Collected Works, by Leonard Sweet, retrieved at sermons.com 5/23/17

² Memorial Day: Hopeful Memory, Craig Watts, retrieved at preaching.com 5/23/17.

³ Watts