

Holy History
Joshua 4:1-10a, 19-24

Why do we need memorials? Why do we need to remember important people and events from our past? Well, all too many Americans have come to the conclusion that we don't, that our history is unimportant. Now, part of such a focus on the future is built in to our DNA – Americans have always been forward thinking people, straining toward the horizon, wondering what lies beyond the next hill. But today, as technological innovation advances at dizzying speed, many people have come to the incorrect conclusion that history has little to teach us – what could we possibly learn from primitive people who didn't even have cell-phones? Let's focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) instead!

Worse yet, many who call themselves "woke" have come to the conclusion that the beliefs that many of our ancestors held about race and culture have rendered them unworthy of our respect or even our study. Those who are "woke" have no patience with earlier generations who were not as far along on the American journey of freedom and equality as we are, even though without the contributions of white, male, Southern slaveowners like Washington and Jefferson and Madison none of us would have the freedoms we enjoy today.

Of course, living as we do in Southwest Mississippi, we are more likely to understand how true are the words of William Faulkner, who could apparently be concise when he chose: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." People come from literally all over the world to immerse themselves in our history – not just to see beautiful buildings such as these, but to meet the descendants of those who built them and to experience the gracious hospitality, wonderful food and amazing music that our blend of British, French, and West African culture has produced. For example, in just the next two weeks in Port Gibson, we'll be commemorating both a Blues singer-songwriter and welcoming guests to a living history presentation at a Civil War battlefield site. In how many places in the country can you do that?

And I like to think that one of the touchstones of our culture, the way we respect our elders by saying "Yes, ma'am" and "No, sir," reflects a broader reverence for the history that has made us the people we are today. It is certainly the case that no one has ever accused us change-resistant Presbyterians of being indifferent toward the past!

But even we Mississippi Presbyterians need memorials because, like all human beings, it is so easy for us to forget the great things God has done for us. That was certainly true of the Ancient Israelites. Just three days after God had led them out of slavery in Egypt by parting the waters of the Red Sea, just three days after God allowed those same waters to crash down on Pharaoh's pursuing army, they came to a place called Marah where the only water was bitter, unfit for drinking. In the urgency of their thirst, they forgot how God had miraculously saved them, and began grumbling and complaining. And again, less than two months after they had walked on the dry bed of the Red Sea, with its waters that had stood as a wall on their right and left hand, they ran out of food and complained again, saying that they would have preferred to die as slaves in Egypt. Under the pressure of their hunger, they even went so far as to accuse Moses of trying to murder them.

Yes, how quickly we all forget. It doesn't matter how many times God has bailed us out. It doesn't matter how many impossible problems God has solved for us during our lifetimes. It doesn't matter how many desperate circumstances from which God has rescued us in the past. No, the next time any sort of trouble comes along, it is all too easy for us to do what those Israelites did: to

complain, to wonder if God is listening to our prayers, or perhaps even to wonder if He cares about us at all. When we forget what God has done for us in the past, it's so easy for us to lose faith.

And I think that's why God's people have always been historians, reminding ourselves over and over again about the mighty acts that God has done for us and for the generations that have gone before. After all, the very first thing Moses did after leading God's people through the Red Sea was to write a song about it – you can find it in Exodus chapter 15. And the song instantly became a big hit, with Moses' sister Miriam and the rest of the women picking up their tambourines and singing along: "Sing to the Lord for He is highly exalted – the horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!"

Of course, Moses wrote another song about God's control of all the events of history – Psalm 90 – we sang part of Isaac Watts' paraphrase of it this morning: "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home." Songs like these recall the mighty acts God has done for His people throughout the years, and thus build our hopes for His help in the future.

And think about Psalm 114, which we read responsively this morning. Like the Song of Moses, it tells the story of the Exodus, but brings it up to the events of today's passage. So, as Joshua and the people with him sang songs like these, they remembered how God saved His people from slavery in Egypt by making the Red Sea turn around and run in both directions. They remembered how the earth quaked at Mt. Sinai, when God came down to give the people the Ten Commandments. They remembered how God had given them water to drink in the desert, opening rocks from which pure water flowed. And they remembered how God made the waters of the Jordan River turn back, to make it possible for them to enter the Promised Land.

But, as they sang these songs, they didn't just remember the miraculous power God had used to protect and provide for His people. No, songs like these also gave them fuel for their faith in God as they faced their next challenge: the conquest of the land He had given them to possess.

And that's really the same reason Joshua directed the people to set up a memorial after crossing the Jordan River. And make no mistake – this memorial belonged to all of them. All the people were represented in its construction, as a man from each tribe was chosen to carry a big rock from the middle of the river to the place where they camped. Yes, it was thus their memorial, a reminder to themselves and to their children. And that pile of 12 rocks would give the generations to come an opportunity to tell once again the story of how God had brought them into the promised land, and thus to rekindle their awe and wonder and confidence in such a mighty and merciful God.

Now, we Americans have our share of folk songs which recount the deeds of heroes from John Henry to Casey Jones to Davy Crockett. And we have built lots of memorials – from the towering austere majesty of the Washington Monument to the shining Gateway Arch in St. Louis to the simplicity of Plymouth Rock, we have remembered our heroes and the great deeds they have done. And we Mississippians are no strangers to such remembrances. We have just completed two new historical museums in our capitol city, whose very name commemorates Andrew Jackson. In fact, just learning about all the people for whom Mississippi's streets, counties and cities are named would form a rather comprehensive history course, wouldn't it? (Although I do wonder how the poor Marquis de Lafayette would think of the way we have repaid his bravery and devotion to the cause of liberty by butchering his name so badly in Jefferson County!)

But in contrast, how well do we Christians celebrate our holy history? How well do we Presbyterians remember the great things God has done for us as a congregation or as individuals? If we were going to write a song like Psalm 114 that describes our own experience, what things would we

include? What significant or even miraculous events in our own history serve as fuel for our faith, as reminders of the power and love of God?

Maybe you can remember when you or one of your loved ones got sick and, in spite of what the doctors said, you got well. Maybe you can remember a time when you escaped death or serious injury, and you're just not really sure how. Maybe a job offer appeared out of the blue, or a contract or customer came your way when you were in desperate need. Or maybe you can point to how you just happened to bump into someone who became the most important person in your life. Remembering these things and giving God the glory for the way He has intervened in your life is engaging in this kind of holy history.

And if our congregation were to write a song of praise to God for His providence, what would we include? You could say that the very existence of this building is such a reminder – after all, it was new when the Union Army marched through in 1863, and there were lots of church buildings in Jackson that didn't survive that experience. And I don't know about you, but I think it was remarkable that when the Lum house burned just north of the Sanctuary in 1998, there was a steady breeze from the south during the whole incident – we didn't even get any soot on the building or any smoke smell inside these rather porous windows. And of course, when we look at our smooth transition into the EPC and especially when we compare it to the terrible problems other congregations had, we can't help but be thankful.

And of course the Church as a whole regularly rehearses this sort of holy history whenever we repeat the words of the Apostles' Creed, reciting the great facts of the faith. For we remember that God has saved us, not just from slavery in Egypt, but from the power of sin and death. We remember that God has fed us not just with bread and water in the desert, but with Jesus, the One Who is the Bread of Life. And we remember that God has not just given us a land in which to live in this world, but has promised to raise all who trust in Him from the dead, giving us transformed bodies that will live forever with Christ on an Earth made clean from all the ravages our sin has caused. These are the great events that have made us who we are, the great promises to which we cling. The great drama of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the centerpiece of the holy history we need to tell over and over again.

And as Joshua reminded the people in verse 24, the story of Jesus, the greatest hero of all time, needs to be told, not just to God's people and their children, but to all the peoples of the earth. For it is only as we come to know more about Jesus and His love that we can trust in Him as Savior. It is only as we come to know more about Jesus and His glory that we can bow the knee to Him as Lord. And it is only when we give ourselves to Jesus that we can start to see God's fingerprints all over our own history, realizing how He has protected us in His providence through all the circumstances of our lives.

So, let's remember our own holy history. Let's share the story of the mighty acts God has done for us as individuals and as a congregation. Let's proclaim the good news of Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection. And as we rehearse the mighty acts of God throughout history, may Jesus receive all the glory He deserves.