

The Importance of Remembrance Joshua 24:22-33

In the midst of a global pandemic which has claimed a little over half a million lives around the world, and in the face of economic shutdowns that have thrown millions out of work across the United States, it seems that the most urgent topic of conversation has become ... what to do about Confederate monuments. Suddenly, it has become absolutely necessary for people to throw all social-distancing caution aside in order to march in the streets to protest century-old statues honoring those who fought in a war 160 years ago. In fact, the mayor of New York City has specifically allowed these kinds of demonstrations to continue, even while prohibiting all other large public gatherings and parades.

What gives? Putting partisanship aside for the moment, why do historical monuments inspire such passion? Well, why do we build those kinds of monuments? In the first place, because no one lives forever. That's the sobering reality that we find in the last few verses of this passage. Joshua may have been a faithful servant of the Lord, leading his people into battle and challenging them to lives of greater holiness. Joshua may have made it to 110 years old. But Joshua eventually died. Eleazar the son of Aaron may have been a faithful priest, illustrating for his people the wonderful truths of Christ's sacrificial death for all our sins. But Eleazar also died, and he was succeeded by his son Phinehas. And eventually all the elders who remembered Joshua, all the leaders who could tell the story of his achievements and his character died too.

So, if we want future generations to know anything about us, we need some kind of memorial – that's why we put headstones on our loved ones' graves. And this urge to be remembered is as old as mankind – in fact the oldest man-made structures that have survived to this day are tombs. Of course, we've all heard of the pyramids of Egypt, the tombs of the Pharaohs – the oldest of them was built in the 2600's BC. But our European ancestors also built massive tombs, stone dolmens made of slabs of slate and granite, and then often covered with earth. One such tomb was constructed in Normandy around 4850 BC.

But how well have those ancient monuments done in helping future generations remember their ancestors? Well, the bodies buried almost 7,000 years ago in that tomb in Normandy are long gone – only a few arrowheads, stone axeheads and some pottery remain. We don't even know the names of the people buried with such care and at such great expense. Their tombs remain, but they, along with their stories, have vanished.

Now, we do know the name of the Pharaoh who commanded that the Great Pyramid of Giza be built around 2540 BC – Khnum Khufu. But that's about all we know. Whatever inscriptions may have been on his massive monument were removed when its smooth limestone surface was dismantled and repurposed for other buildings thousands of years ago. Because of the scarcity of contemporary documents that mention Khufu, we don't know how long he reigned, or much about what he did. And the only complete image of him that has survived from antiquity is a tiny ivory carving only 3 inches tall. No matter how great his wealth and power may have been, his story has largely vanished.

And what about Joseph? He had been taken as a slave down to Egypt hundreds of years after the building of the Great Pyramid and had died hundreds of years before he was laid to rest on his father Jacob's property – he had wanted to come home to the Promised Land, and the people of Joshua's generation granted his request. But we have no idea exactly where his grave is located – several modern-day sites hold competing claims. We would know nothing about Joseph if we did not have the stories written down about him in the Bible.

And come to think of it, that's the problem with every image – without some independent knowledge of the story behind its creation, its meaning changes with every viewer. This was obviously true for the ignorant mob that hauled down a bust of Ulysses Grant in San Francisco – in the name of racial justice they attacked an image of the leader of the Union Army that destroyed slavery in the United States. But the statue wasn't able to object as the crowd toppled it from its pedestal – it couldn't tell its story, even if the crowd had wanted to hear it.

And this isn't just a limitation of politically divisive images. Imagine, for example, that you are crossing the bridge over the Little Bayou Pierre into Port Gibson for the first time, and you see the hand on top of this steeple gleaming in the morning sunlight. What does it mean to you? Is it a symbol of the pride and wealth of the congregation? Is it a way of saying that we have the tallest steeple in town – that we are “number one?” I'm told that some tourists have that initial reaction to it.

Of course, we know the oral history that has been handed down to us. We've been told that the original wooden hand was placed atop the steeple in honor of Dr. Zebulon Butler, who liked to point to the heavens while preaching. We thus know that the hand is intended to perform the function of all steeples, albeit in a more provocative manner – to remind human beings that this life is not about us, our busy agendas or our urgent concerns. No everything and everyone that lies in the shadow of the hand was created by God and for His glory. The hand thus points us to God, the only proper focus and purpose of all of life.

But how could we possibly know any of that only by looking up at the steeple? We can't. So for the image to have its intended effect, it must be combined with the story, not of Dr. Butler, but of the Christ Whom he preached. In fact, without the words of the gospel, it's all too easy for any Christian image to give us the wrong idea – so it's no wonder that our Presbyterian ancestors scrupulously avoided the use of any sort of images in their places of worship, obeying God's second commandment to the letter. And since we consider the proclamation of the Word of God the most important part of our service, our pulpits are the focus of our worship spaces – after all, we really haven't come to see the building, as beautiful as it is. We've come to hear the story.

That's why Joshua didn't just raise up a stone of witness as we see in verse 27. No, verse 26 tells us that he also wrote the words of the covenant made between God and the people in the same book that contained the Law of the Lord. The stone monument was thus intended to do what our hand does, to do what this pulpit does, to point people to the story of God and His people, to point people to the book which is filled with the promises God made to His people, and thus to remind people of the way He had kept those promises.

And, when we know its story, the image of the cross does the same thing for us, doesn't it? It is, after all, one of the most common of Christian symbols – many people wear crosses as jewelry. But what exactly does it mean? To the people alive at the time of Christ's crucifixion, a cross would only have been a symbol of terror. The Roman government used crucifixion throughout the Empire to cow conquered people into submission, to show them in no uncertain terms the humiliation, pain and death that awaited any who would dare to defy the absolute authority of Caesar. They had the same sort of reaction to the cross that we might have to an electric chair or to a gallows with a hangman's noose dangling from it.

But when we Christians see the cross, we see something completely different. Because we know the story of Jesus, because we know the gospel, the good news that Paul declares to us in our responsive reading from I Corinthians 15, we know that the cross does indeed point to the horrible death that our sin, our treason against God deserves. But we also know that Jesus chose to die on that

cross in our place. We know that on the cross He absorbed all the punishment for all the sins of all those who trust in Him throughout all space and time. So, when we look at the cross, we see God's justice, but also God's grace. We see God's righteous law but also God's mercy on lawbreakers. We see all those things not because they are somehow inherent in the image, but because we know the story that goes along with it.

But we also know that the cross wasn't the end of Jesus' story. No, as Paul reminds us, Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day. He appeared to hundreds of His disciples, including those who would become the apostles, the leaders of the Church. He even appeared to Paul himself – and when Paul saw the risen Christ, his life was forever changed. We was transformed him from a fierce opponent of the gospel to one of its foremost advocates, from a man who sought to imprison and kill Christians to a man who was willing to be imprisoned and even to die so that others might hear the good news. When Paul saw Christ and realized how his death and resurrection fulfilled so many of the Old Testament Scriptures, he couldn't help but follow Jesus.

And that's the same kind of reaction Joshua wanted future generations to have when they saw the memorial of the covenant between God and His people, and when they remembered the story of all the ways God had blessed them in the past. He wanted them to remember not only the way God had been gracious to keep His promises to them and to their ancestors, but also their own promise to serve God and to obey His voice, their own promise to trust Him enough to submit themselves completely to Him. Joshua wanted the monument and the story behind it to serve as a witness of God's truth as well as a witness of the people's promise to walk in God's ways.

Okay, so what about us? After all, we've heard much more of God's story than the people of Joshua's day ever did. They knew how God brought them out of bondage to Pharaoh, but we know the great price Jesus paid to set us free from bondage to sin and death. They knew God had given them a beautiful land in which to live, but we know that Jesus has promised us not only abundant life now but eternal life with Him forever. And all of us who have made a public profession of faith in Christ have promised to follow Him, to give all that we are and all that we have to Him.

So, just like the generations that came after Joshua, we can forget God and His promises to us. And in forgetting Him, we can deny Him. And in denying Him we can turn our backs, not just on a land which He promised to give us, but on the greatest gift anyone could hope to have – God Himself.

But instead, will we let the monuments around us do their work? Will we remember the story to which they point? Will we allow the cross of Christ and His word to bear constant witness to His justice and His love? Will we remember not only His saving grace but our own pledge of allegiance to Him? In the power of the Holy Spirit, will we allow our lives of love and service to become a living monument to Him, to His holiness and righteousness, to His mercy and grace?