

"I Will Put a Stone on Your Cairn"

Rev. Peter Bynum
November 5, 2017

⁷The LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'"

⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God." ¹⁰Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap."

¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

⁴When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ²"Select 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?' then 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 forever." (Joshua 3:7 – 4:7)

After the nation of Israel took its first steps into the Promised Land, Joshua instructed the people to designate twelve men, one from each tribe, to retrieve a stone from the dry riverbed of the Jordan. They carried them into the site of the first camp, and there, in Gilgal, Joshua stacked the stones together to build a small memorial. He turned to the people and said

When your children ask you in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall tell them the story. Tell them the story of how the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, just as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea... We will do this so 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.

There is something about the stacking of rocks that connects with the deepest places in our hearts and our memories. If we think of ancient civilizations, much of what remains today

essentially boils down to stacks of rocks -- vestiges of once great buildings, arenas, and houses of worship. But not all important monuments are of such a scale.

Scattered across the rolling hills and craggy mountains of Scotland, for example, are mounds of rough stones built into small landmarks. They are found on moors and hilltops, near waterways and mountain passes. In Scottish folklore, they are called "cairns," and for centuries it has been a tradition for Scots to find and carry stones and to add them to existing mounds. To the Scottish people, they have become cherished expressions of common memory. Even today, Scots warmly recognize one another with an ancient blessing, handed down from generation to generation, saying simply "I will put a stone on your cairn."¹

In the Scottish experience, cairns have had a number of practical uses and purposes, all of which help us to understand what Joshua had in mind when we took the stones of the twelve tribes and fashioned them into a small cairn in Gilgal. The first such purpose is to mark a grave or memorialize a death. Burying the dead under a pile of stones is an ancient practice, especially in places where digging is difficult. At the end of the movie *Schindler's List*, director Stephen Spielberg included a long procession in which the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, those who owed their lives to the courage and commitment of Oskar Schindler, filed by his grave to place a stone on the marker. In Jewish tradition, such a gesture is more than a memento of a visit. It expresses a desire to offer an enduring remembrance.² Greenery withers, and flowers fade, but a stone can withstand wind and rain.

For the nation of Israel, the loss of Moses was keenly felt. He had led them for decades, guiding them through the wilderness wanderings and bringing them safely within view of the Promised Land. In addition, a full generation of Israel's people had been lost in the forty years of travel. Here, as this long journey reached an end, the people paused to remember, with something more permanent than flowers, the people whom they had loved and lost -- those who had literally carried the nation to this critical moment. Having just celebrated All Saints Day, we recognize the power of this kind of remembrance -- how good it is to pause and give thanks for those beloved souls who, during their earthly lives, helped to show us the way. **For by this, Joshua says, we shall know that the living God is among us (3:10).**

The second way that cairns have been used through history is to mark and celebrate a moment of success. Mountain climbers, for example, will sometimes construct a stone cairn to mark the successful end of a climb. Summit cairns, as they are called, are often more than a stack of stones. The coolest ones have a hollowed out area to provide some shelter. They might also contain a waterproof box or closed section of PVC pipe where climbers can add their names to the register of those who have made it to the top.³ But a summit cairn does not have to be in a physically high place. It can memorialize any high moment in life, or mark any time that a person or community wants to hold onto and remember.

For the Israelites, the monument at Gilgal was this kind of cairn as well. It marked the victorious end of a long and harrowing journey. The important point to make here, however, was that this monument did not celebrate human achievement as much as it celebrated God's achievement.

Some of you may have done a trust fall exercise at some point. It is a challenge to close your eyes and fall backwards, trusting that your friends and colleagues will catch you before you fall. There are some funny videos on YouTube of people who have taken this experiment to the streets

¹ Lynn Miller, "There To This Day," <http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2014/10/this-day-art-lectionary.html>; "Cairns of Scotland," <http://www.scotland.com/blog/cairns-of-scotland>

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/putting-stones-on-jewish-graves/>

³ <http://blog.theclymb.com/tips/ancient-art-reading-rock-cairns/>

and tried a trust fall with complete strangers. Most of them seemed to choose a beach as the preferred location, which was a good idea, because as you might expect, when you walk up to a stranger, say out of the blue "I trust you," then turn around and fall toward them, you might get caught a few times. But what do you think happens most of the time? Yes, he just goes crashing to the ground without a hand to slow him down even a little bit.

In a way, the whole wilderness wandering had been a trust fall exercise for the kingdom of Israel. God had promised to be there to guide and to save. But how did they know? Could they be sure? And here, at the very end, one more huge trust exercise: The word of the Lord comes through Joshua: "Priests, with all of your ceremonial garb -- fully clothed with your linen tunics, your white trousers, your turbans and sashes -- I want you to pick up this Ark. [Bear in mind that the Ark, given the thickness of its wood and the weight of its gold plating, would probably have weighed about 288 pounds.]⁴ So priests, pick this thing up and walk into this river, swollen with extra water from the rainy season. What could go wrong? Just walk out there and see what happens..."

And they do. Once again, they trust. And once again, God comes through. Just like when they were hungry, and God had provided quail and manna from heaven. Just like when they were thirsty, and God made water flow from the rock. Just like when they had been pursued by the strongest army in the world, and God opened a route through the sea. As soon as the feet of the priests touched the water, it swelled back up and the entire nation passed through on dry ground, as the priests stood there holding the Ark in the deepest portion of the river, not a drop on them. No wonder Joshua decided to erect a cairn, a monument to recognize the victory that God had won, the trust that God had earned with steadfast care and abiding love. No wonder he wanted to stack these stones... **for by this, Joshua says, we shall know that the living God is among us.**

Last, but certainly not least, a cairn can serve as an aid to navigation. Large coastal cairns provide markers for ships and mariners at sea. Mountain cairns mark trails or keep hikers away from dangerous areas. Even as they serve to mark our memories and celebrate past successes, cairns can also remind us that our journey is not over until we are the ones beneath our own pile of rocks. As we walk the byways of life, guiding cairns can direct our steps and keep us walking the straight and narrow paths that lead us into God's own heart.

Such was the case for the nation of Israel. Even though the people had entered at last the land of God's promise, in many ways their challenges were just beginning. The books of Joshua and Judges describe the painful, often violent and conflicted story of the Conquest of Canaan. Like our lives of faith, it is a story that contains as much failure as it does success. Like our lives in the spirit, the spiritual wandering continues even as we are continually welcomed home. Gilgal would remain a place where the people would continually return, and every time their eyes would fall upon those stones, they would be reminded to look once more to God, who has promised to guide their steps until all wandering is done, and every tear is wiped from their eyes. **For by this, Joshua says, we shall know that the living God is among us.**

Even today, thousands of years later, we are still building these little monuments in our lives -- these things that remind us where we have been, that affirm those celebratory moments that have made us who we are, and that still point us in the ways that we need to go.

It might be a group of lit white candles, lovingly arranged on a table, reminding us of those people who have shaped us through their example, beloved people we have loved and lost.

It might be a garden that we tend with care and reverence, a place that reminds us of where our community started and how far it has come.

⁴ Josiah Derby, "The Gold of the Ark," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 33:4 (Oct. 2005), pp. 253- 256, accessed November 3, 2017, http://jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/334/334_Goldark1.pdf

It may be a photograph, hung in the stairwell so we see it both in our going out and our coming in, of a graduation, or a baptism, or a wedding day -- something that reminds us of a mountaintop experience in our lives -- something that we want to make sure to remember, because it reminds us of the deep blessings that God has given to us.

It can be anything that memorializes someone we have loved, that celebrates something we have cherished, or that still guides us on the pathways of life. **For by all of these things, Joshua says, we shall know that the living God is among us.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.