

May 28, 2017
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All Scripture quotations are NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

Joshua 4:1-7
What Do These Stones Mean?

Officially Memorial Day was first celebrated on May 30, 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War. The first large observance was held at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington D.C. Over 20,000 Union soldiers were buried at Arlington Cemetery and several hundred Confederate soldiers as well.

Memorial Day started as a day of remembrance...a day to remember those who gave their lives in the conflict that shook this nation to its very core...and it has become a day to remember all those ever since who have given their lives in defense of this nation and its ideals. It's important to remember because sacrifice like that deserves to be honored. It's important to remember so that we do not take for granted the benefits that we enjoy because of the selfless sacrifice of others. It's important to remember so that we do not, in the future, ask for that sacrifice too lightly or too quickly.

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The Church Year is a tool to help us remember.

We need Advent and Christmas. The significance of Christmas is not that we know with any certainty the day that Jesus was born. Advent is not about predicting the day that Jesus will return. We need Christmas because we need to be reminded that the God of the universe entered our world as a helpless baby, becoming one of us so that he might save us from ourselves. We need Advent because we need to be jarred out of our complacency and preoccupation with our own little worlds and reminded that our hope is not to be found in our present circumstances—good or bad—but in what God has already done and what God will do...for the whole world.

We need Lent...not because 40 days of the year are enough for us to be honest with ourselves about our own brokenness, desperation, and

rebellion, but because if we don't take a few days to be reminded in a special way we are likely not to remember at all.

We need Holy Week—Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter--because if we are not reminded again and again we will forget. We will forget that Christ entered into our brokenness, desperation, and rebellion; that nothing we have experienced is beyond the experience and understanding of our Lord; that he bore the burden of sin, evil, and death so that we might be set free; that nothing that is wrong with this world or with us can defeat him or his love for us or his desire to forgive us or his power to make us new; that death is indeed a powerful reality in our world, but it is not more powerful than Jesus; that because he lives, in him we live also.

We are a forgetful people. God knows we are a forgetful people. He knows we need symbols and visual monuments and special days to help us remember.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is, in part, about helping us remember. "This is my body given for you," Jesus said, "Take and eat. Do this in remembrance of me. ... This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink of this cup, you remember me."

The Bible has lots and lots of examples of memorials set up to help God's people remember. The Israelites often used stones to mark a place where they experienced God's faithfulness in a powerful way. The stones helped them remember.

When Abraham's grandson Jacob was running away from home to escape the rage of his brother, he had a dream in which he saw a stairway to heaven and angels going up and down. He heard this promise from God: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. ... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When Jacob awoke, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He took a stone and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it...to help him remember.

How often do we get ourselves into situations where we are so preoccupied with our circumstances that we become unaware of the presence of God? How easily do we conclude that he is not paying

attention to what we are going through, or that he has lost track of us, or even that he no longer has any use for us?

Then God does something or says something to remind us...to remind us that he does know us and what we're going through, that he has not left us and never will, that he does indeed have a purpose for us. When that happens--when God does something or says something that cuts through our loneliness and our fear and our preoccupation with our own little worlds--it's important that we pay attention and it's important that we remember. Because we are a forgetful people.

After forty years of wandering the wilderness, God led the Israelites once again to the edge of the Promised Land. Moses got a glimpse of the Promised Land, but he died without setting foot there. Joshua was the one who would lead the people through this part of their journey.

All that separated the people from the land God had chosen for them was the Jordan River. God parted the waters for them so that they could cross, just as 40 years earlier he had parted the Red Sea so the people could escape the armies of Pharaoh.

God told Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." So Joshua sent the twelve men to each get a stone.

"These stones," Joshua said, "will serve as a sign. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them how God remembered his covenant with Abraham and with Jacob and with us, and he cut off the waters of the Jordan River so that we could cross into the Promised Land."

"These stones," said Joshua, "are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their own unfaithfulness—because of their fear of giants and their anxiety about the unknown and their unwillingness to trust God. God remained faithful and he brought about his plan anyway, and the children of the people who were delivered from slavery in Egypt were led by God into the Promised Land. Their parents had been quick to forget all that God had done to deliver them from Egypt. This generation, and the generations to come, needed to remember.

They gathered stones and set them up in a pile, so that every time they saw those stones they would remember that God is faithful and God has a plan and God always brings about his plan.

We are a forgetful people. Sometimes stones can help us remember.

Distribute the stones. Invite people to remember. Invite people to share with God and, if they wish, to share with others, and then to place the stone in the basket or let a child retrieve the stone and put it in the basket for them. No pressure. It's all good.

Let these stones be a reminder. And when someone asks, "What do these stones mean?" tell them that God is faithful, God remembers, God knows what we're going through, God has not left us and he never will, God has a purpose for us, and God has a plan.