

“Symbolic Rocks, Honest Memory, Holy Presence”

Joshua 3:14-17; 4:15-24
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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The rocks are the first part. We certainly should not say, “The rocks are the easy part,” if we are honest with ourselves; because the rocks will remind us of some parts of life which seek our honest acknowledgment. And honesty / “coming clean” with ourselves is truly a tough part of life. So we do not want to say the rocks are “easy.” They symbolize something very tough to achieve.

The rocks are the first part, and it really does not matter whether, from the telling of the story, the people (who were crossing the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua) picked up the rocks on the east bank, or whether they reached down and picked them up from the middle of the riverbed as they crossed. In either case, they made a pile / they built a monument on the west bank. It was, in the words of the hymn we sometimes sing (“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”), an “ebenezer.” It was a monument which symbolized an event once-upon-a-time in a particular place from which people wanted to remember that God was encountered there. Granted, it was not as tall as the Washington Monument or the San Jacinto Monument. It was, we suspect, closer to the size of a state historical monument. Yet it was more / it symbolized more than its form and content, which was a pile of rocks.

Take a look at the flag of the United States of America, for example. Its form is a rectangle of cloth, usually cotton or nylon. Its content is an upper left square of fifty white stars on a blue background, with the remainder of the banner featuring horizontal stripes, seven being red (top and bottom) with six white stripes alternating every other one. Yet a flag like ours symbolizes more than its simple form and content.

We are taught from an early age that blue symbolizes the vast sky above, and perhaps the oceans east and west and the rivers and bodies of water throughout. The stars on the field of blue represent the fifty states. The red symbolizes blood shed for the idea and ideals of the USA. The white symbolizes the purity or nobility of the idea and ideals of this nation; and their number (thirteen) symbolizes the number of original states at the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Symbolism requires a minimum of memory, sensing, for example, that the flag is more than three colors and three shapes brought together in the same pattern on a type of cloth. The flag’s symbolic nature calls us to remember, and honest memory is difficult and tough.

Citizens of the United States are not the only ones who struggle to remember honestly and candidly. The nation of Israel, from “Bible times,” has similarly struggled, as has every group whether the group is racial, ethnic, religious, geographic, economic, age or gender-based, etc.

The former slaves from Egypt crossing from east to west through the waters of the Jordan River were not entering an uninhabited land, anymore than those who disembarked at the Jamestown colony or at Plymouth Rock were entering an uninhabited land. When someone moves in, someone else is squeezed; and the more who move in, the more squeezing that occurs. Sometimes the initial “squeezors” become, after time, the “squeezees.” Those who assume land or take land, may later feel like those they once squeezed when others come along behind them and want to take land or space. Honestly, that doesn’t feel so good. We may say, “I didn’t come here, or ‘my people’ did not come here and work hard for someone else to move here and want a piece of the action which I or we have worked hard to achieve.” This sort of “not liking something” statement-of-feeling is the first and easiest part of honesty. It gets tougher from there, because the next step is a recognition that we who, over time, feel squeezed, are the ones who have also been – or our ancestors were – the ones squeezing someone else.

And is there really any purity of motive or cause, with us as individuals or with religious groups or nations, political, social, economic, ethnic, gender, or age-specific groups? I may want to think that my group is “purer” than yours, but who am I kidding? Or to whom am I being untruthful? In the middle of the 1500s, during the so-called Protestant Reformation, a debate occurred between a follower of Martin Luther, whose name was Andreas Osiander, and John Calvin. In addition, the majority of Osiander’s fellow-Lutherans were nervous about a certain aspect of his teachings. (If you are thinking right now, “How did we get from July 4 to some guy with an odd name who died in Germany two-hundred twenty-four years before the Declaration of Independence?” then simply hold on for a second.)

Osiander’s thought and writings, as evaluated by both Calvin and Osiander’s fellow Lutherans, noted that when a person became a Christian, some of Jesus’ “true righteousness” came into that person, rather than a person being “declared” righteous in Christ. Think what a difference there is between those understandings. If a person promotes Andreas Osiander’s line of thinking, that person believes he or she is superior because he/she/they have – literally – a share of Jesus Christ’s righteousness or purity. Calvin and other Lutherans argued against Osiander to say, “God’s righteousness is declared to cover our sin, but no one can claim more ‘purity in Jesus’ than someone else. We’re human beings, sinners, justified, but not purified literally as if we have Jesus’ DNA.”

So we can be honest, even when such honesty is tough. We've not been pure as United States' citizens or as a nation as a whole. We "declare" certain truths as positive for all, but we don't purely live out those truths. Never have. Never will. We don't confess that because we need a "guilt trip" to accomplish anything positive. We realize and confess, and confess and realize, because God's work with us is on-going, and we never have Jesus' purity in our motives, attitudes, or actions.

Still, we are not a people without possibility. We have possibilities as citizens of God's kingdom or God's commonwealth and as citizens of God's world. During the 1800's, certain United States' thinkers and writers promoted an idea called "Manifest Destiny." Built upon a vision promoted by the Puritans two hundred years before, it meant, as we might simply define it, that God intended this nation led by white people, to expand from sea to shining sea as God's gift to the world as a "new Israel," so to speak. The word "manifest" means "clear," "evident," "obvious," or "confirmed." "Manifest destiny," as often understood in United States' history and policy, can imply a sort of "purity" and unquestioned "rightness" even when certain human beings are being squeezed, put at disadvantage, or treated as unequal.

If we have symbolic rocks, reminding us that God has brought us this far and meets us here still today . . . If we cultivate an honest memory to recall how we're not pure like Jesus and never will be, then our Lord's holy presence may meet us again when we turn around "manifest destiny" – the clear destiny.

Sometimes "manifest" is an adjective, meaning "clear," "evident," or "confirmed." It can also be a noun, meaning a roster or list. A ship's or an airplane's manifest is a list of people and materials aboard. Turn around "Manifest Destiny" to understand a peoples' "destination manifest," and it might helpfully indicate to us that ***our destination is clear and confirmed when the whole list of God's people includes all equally***, no favorites because of who had more force, greater numbers, more fluent in a language, a certain shade of skin pigment, or type of religion.

When our Lord's invitation is heard among God's people, those who hear also grow in understanding and practicing how important it is to pull ***more chairs to the table, and even set up more tables. The "destination manifest" of Jesus Christ lists all!*** Every day we do best when we hear the Spirit reminding us: ***"If the Lord's holy presence continues, the destination manifest – who is included in God's present and coming kingdom – includes the names of all, equally."***

-- All honor and praise be to God.