# “A Time And Place To Remember”

Joshua 4:1-8

***While visiting Ghana, Africa, on a mission trip in 2004 our team visited Elmina Castle—also known as St. George’s Castle—on the coast. Built in 1482 by the Portuguese, the white-washed medieval castle served as the final stop on the western Africa slave routes. Forts up and down the coast sent slaves to Elmina to await transport on overcrowded, unsanitary ships to Europe and South America. Slaves departed the castle through the narrow, infamous “Door of No Return.” Up to one thousand male and five hundred female slaves were shackled and crammed in the castle’s dank, poorly ventilated dungeons, with no space to lie down and very little light. Without water or sanitation, the floor of the dungeon was littered with human waste and many captives died from disease. The castle also featured confinement cells—small, pitch-black spaces for prisoners who revolted or were viewed as rebellious. Once slaves entered Elmina Castle they could spend up to three months in these conditions before being shipped off. At one time or another, the British, Dutch and Portuguese all owned and used Elmina Castle for their respective slave trades.***

***Elmina Castle is a place of beauty and horror where the ancient cries of suffering still linger among the stones. It is now a Ghana national monument and was designated a World Heritage Monument in 1979. Simply put, Elmina Castle is a time and place to remember.***

***Maybe you’ve visited places like that: locations that are linked to something significant—often tragic—in history. Auschwitz-Birkenau or any of the other concentration camp locations in Germany and Eastern Europe. The Pearl Harbor National Monument. The Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Great Pyramids of Egypt. Or closer to home, Poe’s Tavern or the Chickamauga Battlefield. As part of our desire to honor, remember and learn from the past, humans need places like these. They provide a connection to our collective past, and remind us of how good we can often be—and how cruel and barbaric we still are.*** Today’s Scripture reading is about that. Let’s turn to Joshua 4:1-8.

Following the death of Moses, Joshua assumed leadership of the people of Israel. They’d been wandering in the desert for forty years and now stood on the brink of the Promised Land. In Joshua 1, God commissioned Joshua to be strong and courageous, to enter the land and possess it, and Joshua made preparations for the invasion. In chapter 2, spies went to into the land to check things out and were aided by Rahab the prostitute. Chapter 3 tells of Israel crossing the Jordan River and setting foot on the soil of the Promised Land for the first time.

*When all the people had crossed the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, 2“Now choose twelve men, one from each tribe. 3Tell them, ‘Take twelve stones from the very place where the priests are standing in the middle of the Jordan. Carry them out and pile them up at the place where you will camp tonight.’”*

*4So Joshua called together the twelve men he had chosen—one from each of the tribes of Israel. 5He told them, “Go into the middle of the Jordan, in front of the Ark of the Lord your God. Each of you must pick up one stone and carry it out on your shoulder—twelve stones in all, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. 6We will use these stones to build a memorial. In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 7Then you can tell them, ‘They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant went across.’ These stones will stand as a memorial among the people of Israel forever.”*

*8So the men did as Joshua had commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan River, one for each tribe, just as the Lord had told Joshua. They carried them to the place where they camped for the night and constructed the memorial there.*

We might say that Joshua oversaw the construction of Israel’s first national monument. It was nothing more than a pile of stones but it represented something of tremendous significance.

***Have you ever visited a historic place only to be disappointed by what you found there? The Louvre Museum in Paris holds the Mona Lisa, one of Leonardo da Vinci’s most famous paintings. I’ve never been there to see it but I’ve heard from people who have. We imagine the Mona Lisa to be this huge painting of this now-famous face. The Mona Lisa is actually quite small—about the size of a regular sheet of paper.***

***A few years ago my parents took one of the Sunshine bus tours up to New England, and one of their stops was at Plymouth Rock. Dad and Mom were unimpressed. They’d been expecting some massive granite mound and instead what they found was a small depression in the ground, and in the middle of the depression sat Plymouth Rock—which was about the size of our two offering plates put together!*** The actual rock itself wasn’t anything great. But it signified something of tremendous significance.

God instructed Joshua to have twelve stones brought up from the Jordan River, at the spot where the Ark of the Covenant had been carried and where the people had crossed. One stone to represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel. *6”We will use these stones to build a memorial.”* And why did God want the Israelites to have a memorial at that site? Because it was a time and place to remember. “*In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 7Then you can tell them, ‘They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant went across.’*

The stone pile served to remind Israel of God’s mighty work among his people. It was a permanent monument to the trustworthiness of God, and to the power of God. The stones would remind the people that they had not come into the Promised Land on their own, under their own power. It was purely the work of God that had enabled them to be there.

***Now they didn’t have those nice little historical markers to put up at the stones like we use at our historical sites. Future generations couldn’t just walk up and read the story on a plaque.*** They had to be told. “*In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 7Then you can tell them…”* The story of God’s saving acts in human history was spoken from one generation to another. At that time there were no Hebrew scriptures written down. Yes, they had the law of Moses but that, too, was passed on through language. Everybody didn’t get a copy of the Ten Commandments or the law. It was taught verbally. It was passed to the next generation around campfires and hearths and community wells.

The stones also offered a “teachable moment.” Children are naturally inquisitive. ***We all know the phase where toddlers want to know “Why?” about everything, amen!*** They’re sponges, taking in all the knowledge and information they can. And Joshua told the Israelites that when their inquisitive youngsters asked about the pile of rocks, they had an immediate “teachable moment” wherein they could instruct and educate their children about God. ***We do the same thing still today:***

***“Mommy, why is that man sleeping under the bridge?”***

***“Daddy, why did you give that man money?”***

***“Momma, why do we stand up and sit down in church?”***

***“Grandaddy, where does the rainbow come from?”***

Memorial Day in America is a time and place for us to remember. Like Joshua’s stone monument that testified to God’s faithfulness, we set aside Memorial Day to remember those who have given their lives in service to our country. It’s different from Veteran’s Day that we recognize in November. Veteran’s Day is for the living who are or have served in the armed forces. Memorial Day is for remembering and honoring the dead.

But I also see Memorial Day—especially for the church—as a time and place to remember those close to us that we have lost from the family of faith. Since this time last year we have said goodbye to Jim Posey, Alma Gann, Jimmie Irwin, Leroy Grant, Johnny Grimsley, Bill Eldridge, and Ruth Madewell. And some of you have said goodbye to classmates, co-workers and friends as well.

So today is our time and place to remember. This is our time to give thanks, shed a tear, reflect or rejoice. You see before you this morning two tables. In just a moment you’re invited to come forward and light a candle in memory of someone you love and have lost. You may light more than one candle if you desire.

***Some churches—especially the Catholic Church—light candles as a visual representation of a prayer for someone. You might want to think of this in that way. The candle you light not only remembers and celebrates the life of one dear to you; it symbolizes your prayer of thankfulness for him or her.*** As you light your candles, feel free to spend a moment in silent prayer before returning to your seat. We’ll take as long as we need so that everyone has an opportunity to come forward if they desire.

Let us pray:

*Father in heaven, the light of Jesus Christ has dispersed the darkness of hatred and sin. Accept these candles as symbols of those we love, cherish and remember, who dwell now in bliss and holiness in your divine presence. Accept them as tokens of our prayers to you for allowing us to share in their lives. Grant us comfort in our anxiety and fear; courage and strength in our suffering; patience and compassion in our caring; and consolation in our grieving. But above all, give us hope now and always, through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

Please come forward as you desire.