

"God's Monuments in People's Lives"

Joshua 4:1-24

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We like to place people we admire on bronze or marble pedestals but lately, there's been a move afoot to remove those same monuments and memorials because persons have found them offensive. After many years adorning city squares and local parks, statues honoring the likes of Robert E. Lee and other Confederate generals are being torn down and headed for the scrap heap. The rationale is that they not only honor persons who were traitors to their own country but they also fought to preserve an institution as repugnant and evil as human slavery was. But rather than discussing the wisdom or the lack thereof of such moves, I would like us this morning to look at ANOTHER monument- one erected thousands of years ago and half a world away.

Our scripture lesson concerns a monument recalling an event which God did not want his people--the Israelites--ever to forget. In Joshua 3, Israel has moved to the Jordan River bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the Ark being the chest containing the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God. At the Jordan, Joshua tells the people that when the feet of those carrying the Ark touch the water, God would dry it up allowing Israel to pass safely over it. In Joshua chapter 4, a mound of twelve stones, each one representing one of the twelve tribes, is set up in the midst of the river to serve as a monument. Verses 21-24 explain the stones' significance:

And Joshua said to the sons of Israel, 'When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, "What are these stones?," then you shall inform your children, saying "Israel crossed this Jordan on dry ground." For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed, just as the Lord your God had done to the Red Sea, which he dried up before us until WE had crossed; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.

This miracle was to remind the Israelites and their children and their children's children that even as God was faithful to their forefathers, delivering them from the bondage of Egypt, so God would remain ever faithful towards THEM. As God had in the past delivered Moses and his people from slavery by leading them through the Red Sea, so too would God demonstrate SIMILAR faithfulness to them and those stones served as a sign or seal of that promise.

But there is a second monument we need to consider, one not made of stone and set in the middle of the Jordan but those monuments erected by God in the midst of our lives. These monuments consist of moments in OUR life, occasions when we knew that God had encountered US in a very special way. They were incidents when "we knew that we knew that we knew" that God was in fact REAL and had revealed himself as clearly and as surely as God had to those Israelites many centuries ago. I believe that at strategic junctures in our lives, all of us have experienced such moments when we desperately required God's help, when we needed SOME assurance that God was real and that he knew our names and understood our situation and was deeply concerned for us. And it was in those moments that we received an answer from God and we KNEW that it came from God- there was no doubt about it in our minds. We called out

and God heard our cry, and God revealed himself to us in such a very special, very personal way that we could not deny it. Well, these occasions become important monuments or signposts in our lives. They are "monuments" raised up by God in our history to help us remember just how faithful he was when we called out to him.

Of course, not every crisis does God show himself to us so dramatically. There are times we call out to God and it seems there is no response but then it is in those moments that we have to become a people of FAITH. God says to us in those occasions when he seems so silent and so far from us, "Remember how I answered your prayer at such and such a time and such and such a place, when I performed that healing, or rendered that miracle, or just let you know in a powerful way that I was with you, beside you, as you walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death- well, let those times serve as monuments of my faithfulness to you, that I would never leave nor forsake you no matter how high the flood waters rise. REMEMBER them and tell your children and children's children about them for the memory of my faithfulness to you in times past will be a constant source of strength and faith to you."

There are a number of distinct incidents in my OWN life where God met ME in a most powerful and dramatic way. They remain a constant source of faith and I shall never forget them. They stand as monuments more sacred than any made by man for these were constructed by God alone. Let me share just one of those occasions with you this morning:

Now in the brief time I've served as your pastor, I have mentioned from time to time of how I flew out to California in the mid-70's to finish college and attend seminary, and how that experience profoundly shaped my life. Well, as Paul Harvey liked to say, "Here now is the REST of the story!" When I graduated from college in 1977, I realized that before going off to seminary, I would first have to work for a period of time and pay off a large chunk of my college bills. It would also give me the opportunity to get more involved in my home church—the Felton Presbyterian Church—a congregation I was deeply committed to. A friend of mine had an insulation company in Santa Cruz and wondered if I'd be interested in coming to work for him. Not having any other prospects at the time, I said "SURE." Well, for the next four years I had a truck with a crew working under me where we installed fiberglass batts in new and existing construction projects all throughout central California. During those years, I climbed under subfloors and into attics and everything else in between. Each morning, I had to be in the office before 6:30 and often didn't get home until it was well past dark. I was so ambitious that it was not uncommon for me to work six days a week. My boss wanted me to get into the management end of the company but I kept telling him that I wasn't interested for I was convinced that at some point, God would give me the green light to go off to seminary and I wanted the freedom to be able to walk away from my job at any time. During those years, I became a leader in my church. I taught an adult Sunday School class, served on various church committees, often preached in my pastor's absence, and came under the care of Presbytery- a major prerequisite to my attending seminary. Never once did I abandon my dream of becoming a Minister of the Word which GOD had placed in my heart years earlier.

Well one year turned into another and then another and STILL another. But then one night in the spring of 1981, I came home from work, took my shower, and then went into my

bedroom to read for a while as I often did before going to sleep. As I was reclining in my chair, I began thinking about my call to ministry and for the first time, seriously asked myself, “What has happened to me and my call?” “How come I’m not pastoring a church somewhere?” “What have I been doing with my life that after four years, I’m still crawling under homes and in attics eight to ten hours a day? “Have I been squandering my time, wasting my life, when I firmly believed God had OTHER plans for me?”

I began to think that maybe I never received a call in the first place, or perhaps the call had come and I just missed it. Had I gone straight to seminary after college, I would have already graduated and been on staff at a church somewhere. As I pondered such questions, I could feel the winds of faith slowly begin to leave my sails and waves of depression start to billow over me. Of course my FIRST inclination was to pray. I put my book down, bowed my head, and asked God to give me some guidance and to provide me with some peace for my heart and mind. But the harder I prayed, the more frustrated I became. I felt as though all my prayers were empty, that, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, my words were repeatedly falling on deaf ears.

I looked over to my library and saw an old Presbyterian hymnal. I grabbed it thinking that I might reflect upon a favorite hymn or two. Well, as I placed the book on my lap, it immediately fell open to Hymn #334, John Henry Newman’s *Lead, Kindly Light*. Now several years earlier, I had read Newman’s spiritual autobiography—*Apologia Pro Vita Sua (or Defense of My Faith)*--in which he wrote of a profound religious struggle which eventually led him to abandon the Anglican Church in England in favor of the Roman Catholic Church in which he eventually became a Cardinal. However, for a long period of time, he felt like he was in a spiritual wilderness, and it was out of the depths of that experience that he wrote this famous hymn. Although I had never really examined it before, neither its lyrics or its tune, I felt compelled to study it closely. I began to read it to myself, reflecting on each line:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th’encircling gloom, lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.*

*I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!*

*So long Thy power hath blessed me, sure it will, will lead me on.
O’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent, till the night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile, which I
Have loved long since, and lost awhile!*

As I read and re-read the lyrics of this famous hymn, I felt as though its words were speaking directly to ME. Here was Newman, not asking God for complete and perfect understanding of his situation- only some acknowledgment that God was there, that God

understood his situation, that God was indeed leading him through all his darkness and confusion. He was imploring God to give him just enough light to SEE the very next step- he didn't need any more than that; and then to impart to him the faith to TAKE that step- that was all. He would be content to proceed through life—amid all its mysteries and perplexities—in baby steps, believing that God would be directing his feet until he finally arrived at his destination, at the goal GOD had prepared for him WHEREVER that might be. Never having heard the hymn sung or played, I attempted to follow the notes, humming it softly to myself, and I found that the more I meditated on it, the more I began to feel the weight lift and my faith restored once again.

Well now it was almost midnight and I had to be up in only a few hours for work. I put the hymnal away, switched off the lights, and turned on the radio which I would listen to every night. Usually I would fall asleep to Larry King (this was years before he had his own television show on CNN) but this night, I didn't feel much like listening to any talk radio. So I switched over to FM and thought I might take in some soft jazz or classical music. As I was turning the dial, I came across a Christian radio station, something I rarely listen to. Leaving it there on that station, I then laid down on my bed. After five or ten minutes of music, the announcer finally came on and said those words which to this day I will never forget: "Well, now we've come to the end of another broadcast day. Customarily we conclude our broadcast with our usual theme song, but tonight we're going to do something altogether different. We're going to end our program with John Henry Newman's famous hymn- *Lead, Kindly Light.*" Then they proceeded to close with it.

In that moment, the darkness of my room seemed to fill with light and I suddenly shot up out of bed as though struck by a cattle prod. With tears in my eyes, I started to thank God, praising him for all his faithfulness. In that moment, I came to the profoundest of all realizations- that the living God personally knew my name and understood my situation; that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of Moses and David and Jesus; of the disciples and the saints down through the ages- was MY God as well and equally aware of MY questions and MY fears and MY confusions just as he had been of THEIRS. It was God's way of saying to me, "David, don't worry about the future- just be patient! If I care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, how much more will I care for YOU, my CHILD! You're in the center of my will. Just stay faithful, do not lose heart, and I will continue to provide for your needs as they arise. That is my promise!" The result was that I DID receive that little green light and within the next six months, I found myself enrolled at San Francisco Theological Seminary and well on my way to becoming a Presbyterian minister.

My friends, REMEMBER those monuments that God has erected in YOUR life and cherish them. God has built them into your past for a purpose- that you might never forget his many moments of faithfulness to you. When you have an experience that shakes you to your core, one that seems SO OVERWHELMING that you know that you know that you know there was nothing natural about it, don't credit it to sheer fate or blind luck. DO know that it involves an encounter with God, a moment he never wants you to forget. Like those Israelites of old, he is building a tabernacle, a monument in the center of your life which he wants you to cherish. It might be the surprise answer to some prayer or a confirmation over a decision you've been

struggling with; it may be that God is reminding you that he is real and you are not lost amid all his designs for the world. Just know that as you do, you will find them to be a constant source of faith and assurance which will carry you through whatever crisis or period of spiritual barrenness you may be experiencing and even beyond.

But not only are we to REMEMBER such occasions, we are to SHARE them so that others may know how that same God can and will be just as faithful TO THEM. Share it with your family! Share it with your friends! Share it with your brothers and sisters at church only DON'T keep such an event to yourself! Our testimony is meant to offer encouragement to any person who may be struggling with his or her OWN faith, to those who desperately need some word of assurance THEMSELVES. So I say to you this morning, "Never doubt the power of such moments! God has purposely constructed these monuments so that you might always remember his faithfulness yesterday, today, and tomorrow; moments which will serve as a constant source of faith and encouragement for you and others both now and in the years to come." Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we never praise you enough for your faithfulness. You are present to us in the valleys as well as on the mountaintops, in the dark of night as well as the sunshine of day. We can never escape your presence or your love. Help us to remember that truth which will give us the power to overcome every discouragement. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.