

June 7, 2020: Stones ... Altars ... and Ebenezers

With Glad Klassen, LLWL

Let us centre ourselves for worship. Have a candle ready if you wish to.

LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

Light a candle and say the following

Creator God, we ask you to bless us today, making us ever mindful that you are the Light that guides us through our everyday lives. Let your light shine in us, so others may see you in us.

OPENING PRAYER

Creator and Keeper of covenants and treaties old and new, whose voice we hear in the winds of the four directions, your Spirit inspires us to celebrate your presence and live with respect in creation. The false Doctrine of Discovery has distorted our relations upon these shores for centuries, with colonization twisting and blurring your image in us. Yet you call us, still, to walk humbly seeking the good paths of justice. Our hearts and lands long for liberation and transformation. May our worship reconnect us to the truth of who you are, and who we are, and move us to claim our shared sacred responsibility, for we pray in the name of the broken and blessing one, Jesus. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Joshua 4: 1-9

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to 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, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

1 Samuel 7:12

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

MESSAGE: Stones ... Altars ...and Ebenezers

This message has been prepared by Glad Klassen, for the Faith United Milton congregation on June 7, 2020 and is also shared with Palermo United. ©Glad Klassen 2020. Provided here with permission.

VIDEO: Glad has provided us with a video of her message below and it is available at this link:

<https://youtu.be/Kg8wPZAzGQw>

Prayer:

Generous and loving God, who provides water in the desert, wine at a wedding, fish when there are no bites, bread when we are hungry, and answers when we are confused, be with us this morning, as you are always. Blow through us, that we might sense your presence. Wrestle with us, that we might discern your path. Love us that we might become who you call us to be. Amen.

A prayer by the Rev. Bronwyn Corlett

About 15 years ago I met a man named Richard. Richard, and his wife Gail, were members of a United Methodist Church where I worked in Cleveland, Ohio. I was there on a short-term work visa. When Richard found out I was Canadian, he began to tell me stories of a place where his family spent every summer. A family cottage where he spent over 65 summers. He and Gail now owned the fully restored cottage on Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

Fast forward a couple of years to my work visa ending and a return to the place where most of my family lived, near Winnipeg. No plans, no job, no idea what my next step would be. Richard called me one day with an inviting proposition. Why not come to the Manitoulin, stay with them while until I figure out what my next chapter will be. I couldn't resist. I'll never forget his directions: "Head east on the trans-Canada, and once you get to Thunder Bay keep your eyes open for the inukshuks at the side of the road. You'll see them everywhere. They'll guide the way. And they did. Simple stones, stacked up to mark a place – to show the way."

Well, I ended up falling in love with Manitoulin Island. I lived and worked there for three years before moving to Niagara. The island was where I joined the United Church, and I've never looked back. On the morning that I packed my car to leave the island, I made one last stop at the water's edge. There I found stones – a few small ones, a few larger ones – and I stacked them. An inukshuk of sorts, but more of an altar. Stones to mark the place. To lift a prayer of gratitude. To remember God's faithfulness.

Inukshuks ... altars ... stones ... set in place to show the way, to lift prayers, to remember, and often to mark a special place, a sacred place.

Did you know that in scripture there are 264 passages that mention stones? That's a lot of stones. And maybe we should pay attention if they're in God's word so often.

The story of stones that we'll look at comes of the book of Joshua...chapter 4:1-9 (NRSV)
Twelve Stones Set Up at Gilgal

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to 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, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.”

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, “Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”

So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

How amazing is that? Twelve tribes, 12 stones ... for the Israelites. A memorial forever. Remembering their story, remembering God’s faithfulness when everything seemed impossible.

All these years later, in the Jewish tradition, the stories are told and retold – whether during shabbat, or the biblical feasts – to remember. To never forget what God has done.

Then, there’s 1 Samuel 7:12

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

Ebenezer. Where have we heard that word before?

Well, one place, the old hymn, Come thou fount:

“Here I raise my Ebenezer. Here there by thy great help I’ve come.”

Ebenezer... which means “Stone of Help”.

The Israelites had gathered at Mizpah, and the Philistines found out they were there. They planned an attack on the Israelites because they once again wanted to take possession of the Ark of the Covenant. But Samuel offered up a lamb sacrifice, and prayed, and prayed, and scripture says God thundered with a mighty voice and confused the Philistines, allowing the Israelites to defeat them.

In gratitude to God, Samuel set a stone – an Ebenezer – to offer praise and thanksgiving. A stone, so the Israelites would remember God’s faithfulness.

Why stones? What is it that makes stones so important that God would instruct them to be used as a memorial, or that in gratitude and prayer, they would be piled up as an altar – or ebenezer?

How about this? Maybe God chose something tangible, something strong, permanent, to help us remember. God knows that we forget, that our finite minds can't hang on to everything – even the important stuff ...

... like God's faithfulness.

Even when life is falling apart around us.

Even when we face the fears and uncertainty of a pandemic.

Even when God's beloved are struck down or discriminated against just because of the colour of their skin, or for who they happen to love.

In all of it and through all of it, God is there with us. Our strength in the middle of the mess. We need to remember. And maybe stones are just the thing to help us to not forget. Philosopher and poet George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

On Manitoulin Island, the stone ruins of Wikwemikong Indian Residential school still stand, and serve as a reminder. We must never forget.

Cenotaphs, cairns, statues...

Stones are often monuments or markers. They often show honour, and help us remember the important stuff.

My friend Richard – who told me to follow the inukshuks – not long ago I sat at his bedside in Cleveland as he peacefully left this place for another. And I was there when friends and family gathered to set a stone – a gravestone – to help us remember his life, well lived and 91 years of God's faithfulness.

Maybe it's a prayer stone, a monument, a gravestone

Maybe it's the stone ruins of a building.

They all help us remember. We remember the darkness, so we can appreciate the light.

We remember God's faithfulness as it is the one constant in the hills and valleys of our life stories.

In this current chapter of our life story we're infused with uncertainty, anxiety, isolation, grief ... and so much more.

May I make a suggestion? Find a stone, any stone, maybe one that will fit nicely in your hand. Make it a prayer stone. Something to hold tightly in moments of meditation. Keep it by your bedside, and in those sleepless nights when fears creep in or your brain just won't shut down,

take that stone in your hand. Hold it as a reminder that you are not alone. God is as close as your next breath.

Altars and ebenezers. Stones of comfort, praise, worship, gratitude.
Stones of help. Stones of guidance, and remembrance.

May we daily raise an ebenezer of thanksgiving for the unfailing love of our Creator.

Amen.

HYMN – Here by The Water

Music and lyrics by Jim Croegaert, sung by Steve Bell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUJ8yF3AaXQ>

CLOSING PRAYER AND SENDING FORTH

Let us go forth called to God's holy covenant.

God continues to guide us: attending to our stories, healing us as brothers and sisters, showing us how to live in right relations. God promises to bless and encourage us on the path of respect.

So go with the peace and promise of God, the energy of the Spirit of Love, and the passion of Jesus. Amen.

GO NOW IN PEACE: Faith video (link takes you to Youtube)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdUap5fcp4k>