

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord told Joshua, ²“Take twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, ³and give them the following orders: ‘Pick up twelve stones from here in the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the feet of the priests are standing securely. Carry them over with you and put them at the place where you will stay tonight.’”

⁴So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had selected from the people of Israel—a man from each tribe. ⁵Joshua said to them, “Go to the middle of the Jordan in front of the Ark of the Lord your God. There each man is to lift up one stone on his shoulder. The number will correspond to the number of the tribes descended from the sons of Israel, ⁶so that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in the future, ‘What do these stones mean for you?’ ⁷Then you shall respond to them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. When the ark passed through the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones will serve as a permanent memorial for the people of Israel.”

⁸So the people of Israel did just as Joshua had ordered. They picked up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, corresponding to the number of the tribes descended from the sons of Israel, as the Lord had instructed Joshua. They carried the stones over with them to their lodging place and deposited them there. ⁹Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the feet of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant had stood. They are there to this day.

I can't imagine the scene. The Israelites standing on the western bank of the Jordan, having walked across the river on dry ground. Did they think back to when their parents and grandparents crossed the Red Sea to escape Pharaoh and his army? After forty years of wandering, they were finally in the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, the land God had promised to them for generations. Now was the time to take possession of it. But first, some rock moving. Twelve men, one from each of Israel's tribes, went to the middle of the river, right where the priests were standing with the Ark of the Covenant. They picked up one rock each, carried the twelve stones to the shore, and placed them where they would camp that night. At the same time, Joshua, their new leader after Moses was taken to be with the Lord, did some rock moving of his own. In the middle of the Jordan, where then and only then the feet of men could walk, Joshua placed twelve stones.

As I imagine the scene, I can only picture the Israelites checking the time and patting their feet on the ground, wondering when they could finally get this show on the road and receive what they had waited on for a generation. But that's probably cynical of me. Because this was a moment worth remembering. No, maybe instead of impatience they felt relief. No more

wandering. No more quail and manna. And all of this only because God was with them. So, with smiles on their faces, they moved rocks. With smiles they set a monument at Gilgal. Yes, with ordinary rocks. But with extraordinary meaning.

“What do these stones mean to you?” That’s the question we face as we come together for this monumental day. We too are surrounded by memorials. We’ve got the red paraments we use for the celebration of the Reformation and other church holidays. We’ve got this celebration of the 175th anniversary of WELS we’ve been rejoicing in for the last three weeks. We’ve got historic pictures on our church walls and memorials for Christians who have reached glory ahead of us. And so, especially on a day like today, let me ask you that question again: “What do these stones mean to you?”

God’s command to Israel was simple: “Take twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, and give them the following orders: ‘Pick up twelve stones from here in the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the feet of the priests are standing securely. Carry them over with you and put them at the place where you will stay tonight.’” But then God gave them the why: “The waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD. When the ark passed through the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones will serve as a permanent memorial for the people of Israel.” God commanded the memorial not to glorify the people but to testify to God’s power. It was God whose mighty arms had held back that powerful river. It was God’s mercy that let a sinful people pass on dry ground into a land they did not deserve. As they crossed that river, they crossed from something old to something new.

You could say Israelites were moving from a time of law to a time of gospel. From wandering to thriving. From Moses to Joshua. From their inability to keep God’s commands to God’s gracious providence and salvation. From clinging to promises to receiving them. From death to life. Here at the Jordan, the biggest news was not that the Israelites were entering the land God first promised to Abraham. It was the fact that God was keeping his promise in spite of their sin and rebellion. That occasion deserves a memorial. These stones would serve as silent sermons proclaiming God’s grace.

Like the Israelites, we need memorials too. We forget about the past, far more quickly than we’d like to. Our lives are short, and our memories are even shorter. We take the pictures. We place memorials to remember. We write the histories down so that we’ll never forget. All these reminders are good and necessary. But what do they remind us of?

Too often these stones are set as a memorial to people. We end up honoring ourselves – our endurance, our institutions, our accomplishments – rather than God’s mercy and love. We want our church building to serve as a testament to the longevity that we have accomplished. We want to pat ourselves on the back for our faithfulness to God over all this time.

How easy it was for Israel later to turn their sacred things into idols! How easy it is for us to take monuments made for the glory of God and use them for our own glory. What are the reminders of God's grace that you've made into an idol? Is it the old family Bible that sits on your shelf reminding you of your family heritage, but never gets opened? Is it the framed painting on the wall at church that grandma made, and if we take it down it would be a disgrace to grandma's memory and make you wonder if this is really the kind of church you want to belong to? I'm not saying memorials are bad. They have a place; to honor the faith of those who have run the race ahead of us and won the prize, to point to God's grace that sustained them throughout their lives into death. But if our church buildings – and everything in them – become nothing more than a testament to our greatness and faithfulness, if they take our eyes off of Christ and put them on ourselves, let every church be burned and every memorial plaque ground up and placed in our water, just as the golden calf was for obstinate Israel. Our churches are God's houses, not ours. And there is no one – on this side of heaven or the other – whose name is worthy of praise. God gets the glory. Not us.

The stones here at Gilgal came from the riverbed, a place impossible to cross until God acted. Every memorial of faith is not a tribute to what we have done, but what God has done for us. And so, today is a day of celebrating God's greatness. The Reformation was not a human triumph but a rediscovery of God's grace. Our 175th anniversary as a synod is not a proof of human strength and wisdom but of God's steadfast word. God get the glory. Not us.

But who are these memorials for? God tells Joshua the answer to that question: "...so that this may be a sign among you when your children ask in the future, 'What do these stones mean for you?'" The memorial wasn't for those crossing the river. Though people are forgetful, I doubt this memory would ever leave those whose feet walked the riverbed. No, it was for their children. Generations later, the people would know of the monument in Gilgal. They would know the story, that their entrance into the Promised Land started there, that God held back the waters so that his people could pass on dry ground into the land flowing with milk and honey.

It's holidays and special occasions like this that encourage us to tell the stories. Every September 11th, we tell the stories of where we were in those fateful hours, and the retelling becomes more and more important each year, as more and more of our fellow citizens were not born yet. When my wife and I honeymooned in Hawaii, a tour guide at Pearl Harbor told us of his memories as a seven-year-old native boy living only a mile from the harbor when the attack came. You tell the stories, right? You pull out great grandma's butter dish to share the memories you have of her cooking. You mount the racks of your big bucks so you can tell of that incredible shot. You put the picture of your spouse who's departed to heaven on the nightstand to remember them each and every day. These monuments help us remember and help us tell.

But do they leave us facing backwards sometimes? Do they leave us overly nostalgic, where we're left moaning that the best days are behind us and we are better off living in the past? We can cling too tightly to the past, as individuals and as a church, longing for what was instead of trusting God for what will be. And I know this sounds backwards on an anniversary, as we look to the past. But the danger is not looking to the past. It's looking to past with no focus on the future.

In Israel, these memorial stones by the Jordan River eventually became a de facto museum. People still knew what had happened there but didn't think much about what it meant for them. God did not mean these stones to simply tell a story. He meant them to serve as an eternal witness to his power, so that generations to come would not just grow in knowledge of history or a nostalgia for the past, but so that they would live lives of faith in their times.

Our churches ought not simply be museums either, where the past is spoken about, but as little more than an artifact of the way things were. They should be places that convey everything about the God of history, he who governs the past, present, and future. Because our forefathers thought enough of us to keep the focus of our church and synod from falling on the importance of this building or our church government structure or any other matter that will have little importance in another 175 years. They wanted us – their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren – to know of the God who led his people into the Promised Land, though they didn't deserve it, to know the God who sent his Son to suffer and die to gain heaven for the world, though they didn't deserve it. You want to know what's most important in your church? Look at the baptism records. See all the souls welcomed as God's children over the years. Study the Lutheran Confessions and compare it to your pastor's preaching, to see that our adherence to God's word does not change, even as the world around us does. Yes, let's look at the past. Let's understand the past, but only to inspire the generations to come about God's unchanging faithfulness.

Can you imagine the confidence Israel had when they looked upon those stones? Even after everyone who was there to walk the river floor was with the Lord, there were still those who saw the memorial to God's greatness and mercy and were deeply moved. It's not that different than what we celebrate today. God has given us his word, and within our own church body, it has stood as our great source of comfort and certainty for 175 years.

So, let me come back to that first question again: "What do these stones mean to you?" To Israel, they meant deliverance. To us, the cross and empty tomb, God's word and his sacraments, the Gospel passed down through generations – these are the stones of highest value. Age to age, they remind us of God's faithfulness and never-ending mercy to us. Let the passing down of this truth be your greatest purpose in life. Amen.