

“Reproach is Rolled Away”
2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Joshua 5:9-12
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, March 31, 2019

Somewhere along the BANK of the Jordan RIVER there was once a circle of STONES.

If we take the Old Testament book of Joshua at its word - - Joshua put them there.

It was just after Moses died, and the people of Israel were crossing the river.

They had wandered and wandered - - for years - - in the wilderness.

After escaping - - slavery - - in Egypt.

They had waited and waited to - - make a home - - somewhere.

They had followed Moses - - who followed God - - who had promised.

They believed this promise - - and hoped for this promise:

One day - - you will be at home - - in the world.

And when they crossed that river - - they felt it in their bones: they were HOME.

Now maybe - - all the shame - - and all the pain - - of slavery - - could heal.

According to the book of Joshua - - at that moment - - as they crossed the river into their
new home - - these stones were set up - - in a circle - - at the river.

They were actually located out in the water - - just a bit.

And there's no way to know for sure if those same stones are still there.

It was thousands of years ago.

But at the time of the writing of the Old Testament - - the book of Joshua says - - “they
are still there to this day”. / So - - that would have been written about 2,500 years ago.

Which was centuries after they were actually placed there.

But - - maybe some of those same stones - - ARE still there - - today.

The point was to remember them - - and remember what they meant.

I wonder if anyone at the river that day asked Joshua: why bother with the stones.

They had waited so long to find a home - - and there was lots of work to do.

Why bother to - - take the time to - - set up a bunch of stones?

Joshua said that their children would one day ask: what's the point of the stones?

And he hoped they would remember.

That they would remember the pain - - they had worked to heal.

And that God had delivered them from.

The pain and shame of slavery.

But there was probably someone who thought: well we can do that just fine without taking all this time to pile up stones. / Why bother with time consuming ritual actions like this?

We can just remember - - and be thankful - - and move on.

Maybe.

But according to the book of Joshua - - God affirmed the decision to arrange the stones.

In our Old Testament reading for today, it says that God told Joshua:

that the pain and the reproach of slavery was "rolled away".

Not just taken away - - or removed - - but "rolled"

Like a stone.

And the place was NAMED for the stones:

Gilgal means: "circle of stones" - - from the Hebrew root of the word: "to ROLL"

So this - - thing with the stones - - was important.

It was an act of WORSHIP.

It was a ritual action - - that touched on the very HEART of what God had done.

The reason to bother with the stones was - - to connect with the HEART of God.

It makes me wonder about OUR acts of worship.

How do we - - connect with the heart of God - - in prayer and song and word?

To help me reflect on this, I'll use an episode of Simpsons...

There is an episode of the Simpsons, in which the local Springfield pastor, Rev. Lovejoy, was replaced by a younger and more popular pastor, who was savvy to pop culture. The episode was called "Pulpit Friction" and it kind of revived a sagging 24th season of the Simpsons - - some 5 or 6 years ago now.

Maybe - - this new pastor's character holds a CLUE, I thought. Perhaps there would be a hidden message from Matt Groening to me, about how to survive and even thrive, for 24 seasons in ministry. I watched with interest and excitement...

The story line rehearses familiar themes: Rev. Lovejoy was boring and talked about the Bible. The new pastor was funny and talked about movies and Twitter. Lovejoy resigned and got a job selling hot tubs.

I thought, I bet I could sell hot tubs!

But then good old Bart changed the course of Springfield history. He didn't like the fact that his dad, Homer, was going to church now, and with the help of his church savvy neighbor Ned Flanders, Bart caused a plague of frogs to overwhelm the town.

The new pastor could quote rock songs, but had no idea how to deal with a real disaster of Biblical proportions. Thus, it was, Rev. Lovejoy to the rescue, quoting psalm 23 and boring all the frogs to death.

What could this mean, I wondered?

What was the message for Plymouth Church?

Worship - - is at the heart of the matter, it seems.

And the question: What really is at the heart of our life together as people of faith?

Could the Bible really hold the power to stave off tragedy?

Could God really be, at the center of things?

These seem like important questions.

Paul's letter to the Romans refers to worship in chapter 12. So moving to the New Testament for a minute, listen to what is written there:

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”

A living sacrifice.

Our worship is a living sacrifice.

Our worship comes down to this: a living sacrifice.

Not a killing: but a living sacrifice.

Sacrifice is not about killing for us, but about living. Because a sacrifice has already been made by God in Jesus. Jesus entered into the pain of death. And Jesus offers us a way to live.

And so what does a living sacrifice look like?

A sacrifice of thanksgiving?

Maybe we need to start with the word “sacrifice”.

I'm not sure it's a popular word. It suggests that our worship, and our giving, and our fasting, and our prayers are not about our comfort, and our glorification.

We are not at the center.

God is.

Marva Dawn adds insight to this train of thought, in her book, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*. The book is about Christian worship and addresses the question: what is the point of worship? She writes:

"To worship the Lord is - - in the world's eyes - - a waste of time. It is, indeed, a *royal* waste of time, but a waste nonetheless. By engaging in it, we don't accomplish anything useful in our society's terms.

Worship ought not to be construed in a utilitarian way. Its purpose is not to gain numbers nor for our churches to be seen as successful. Rather, the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it. Moreover, it isn't even useful for earning points with God, for what we do in worship won't change one whit how God feels about us.

To understand worship as a royal waste of time is good for us because it frees us to enter into the POVERTY of Christ. We worship a triune God who chose to rescue the world...by means of the way of humility...humbling himself to suffer.

He did not come to be

"solving the world's problems - - in any sense that the world could understand"

The awe and astonishment of God's presence so far beyond us is so immense that we could hardly react with anything less than fear and trembling - - and the *sacrifice* of all our lives"

Taking God this seriously is countercultural.

It is a total immersion in the eternity of God.

It is the way of humility.

It is the way of sacrifice.

Marva Dawn's words help me understand this image of worship as sacrifice better:

Sacrifice as God's merciful act.

And thanksgiving is our sacrifice in response.

It is a sacrifice because we have to turn things over to God.

It is a sacrifice because we don't get to fix everything ourselves.

It is a sacrifice because it involves acknowledgement of God's infinity..

...and of our limitations.

I believe that acknowledgement is the point of worship.

And it is a profound act.

But it is something that some people might think was really - - nothing.

Which reminds me of a joke:

A parent said, "My son recently took up meditation".

"Oh really", an interested friend inquired.

"Yea, well, at least it's better than him sitting around all day doing nothing"

So much of what we do might be judged as nothing of importance.

A waste of time.

Or even negatively, as in a sacrifice of our personal enjoyment, fun, and free time.

But beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

And God's love and mercy are so beautiful...

...when you have experienced such things...

...I believe, it's hard not to be thankful.

I'm not really saying this so much as an argument, designed to get your logical consent.

I'm just saying it.

It is my witness.

As one who has received mercy, and experienced the beauty of sacrifice.

As I stand on the threshold of life and death with people...

And as I consider the possibilities for my life...

The way things could have gone, both better or worse...

In the end, I am deeply grateful.

I am grateful because all of this is GOD's doing.

We don't roll away pain and reproach in life: God does.

And it is GOD who enters deeply into human sin and sorrow - - and reconciles us.

If God's rolling away the stone of the reproach of slavery is at the heart of what God is doing in the Old Testament - - then reconciling the world to God is at the heart of what God is doing in the New Testament.

Our New Testament reading from 2 Corinthians for this morning is about reconciliation.

It is one of the most amazing parts of all of the writings of Paul.

God was in Christ - - reconciling the world.

Christ - - who ROLLED away - - the stone of that TOMB.

That is the HEART of our WORSHIP.

That's why we worship.

The painting from Norman Rockwell - - Freedom of Worship - - reminds us that people gave their lives in WW2 so that we could worship freely in this country. / It's on your bulletin cover and up here on the screen.

We've been looking at these paintings throughout Lent, and this one today is the fourth of four that we will consider.

As we think about this, listen to the words of the essay that accompanied this painting in the Saturday Evening Post, in 1943. / I'll end with these words:

“Down in the valley below the hill - - is a little white church whose steeple has been my guiding goal on many a pleasant walk.

Often as I passed the door on weekdays when all was silent there - - I wished I might enter - - and sit quietly in one of the empty pews - - and feel deeply the wonder and the longing that had built such - - chapels - - - temples - - mosques - - and great cathedrals...

Everywhere on earth.”

Then the essay describes worshippers entering to worship...

“And so they worship. The poetry of their ritual - - redeems the prose of their daily toil.

The prayers they pray are secret summonses to their better selves.

The songs they sing are shouts of joy in their refreshed strength.

The commandments they receive, through which they can live with one another in order and peace, come to them as imperatives of an inescapable deity - - NOT as edicts of questionable men.

Through these commands they are made part of a DIVINE DRAMA - - and their harassed lives - - take on a scope and dignity that cannot be cancelled out by death.”

As I read these words, I realize...

This painting - - is a symbol for us - - and a memory - - and a hope.

Like the stones at Gilgal were for the people of Israel.

And through worship - - we are CONNECTED - - to the very heart of God:

God's - - reproach rolling - - reconciling - - heart.

Amen.