

Contemplation: What do these stones mean?

Jubilee Mennonite Church

February 17, 2019

Focused Ministry week 1

Message: God speaks to us in the context of relationship with him, calling us again to new life.

Purpose: To launch the prayer process of Focused Ministry with an assertion that God will meet us.

Scripture: Joshua 3:5-6; 4:4-7; 20-24 (Bryce will read); Philippians 1:1-11 (please read)

Synopsis: Contemplation gets a bad rap. It conjures up images of the cross-legged swami on the mountain top dispensing wisdom on the personal level. Rarely does it have much to do with faith, life, and the questions of living in the world. We may even wonder whether we (you and me in the pews) are qualified to hear from God and to be spoken to by the divine. Yet, time and again, the work of the people of God is to be reminded of what God has done by way of listening again for what God is doing or is about to do. We are invited to expect to hear from God—perhaps not in the verbal particular ways that we might prefer-- but hear all the same. As we seek focus, we anticipate the ways that God is speaking to us in the here and now.

Joshua 3:5

Sanctify yourselves;
for tomorrow YHWH will do wonders among you.”

⁶ To the priests Joshua said,
“Take up the ark of the covenant,
and pass on in front of the people.”
So they took up the ark of the covenant and went in front of the people.

Joshua 4:4:
⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites,
whom he had appointed,
one from each tribe.

⁵ Joshua said to them,
“Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God
into the middle of the Jordan,
and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder,
one for each of the tribes of the Israelites,
⁶ so that this may be a sign among you.

When your children ask in time to come,

‘What do those stones mean to you?’

⁷ then you shall tell them
that the waters of the Jordan were cut off
in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD.

When it crossed over the Jordan,
the waters of the Jordan were cut off.
So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”

²⁰ Those twelve stones,
which they had taken out of the Jordan,
Joshua set up in Gilgal,
²¹ saying to the Israelites,

“When your children ask their parents in time to come,
‘What do these stones mean?’

²² then you shall let your children know,

‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’

²³ For the LORD your God dried up
the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over,
as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea,
which he dried up for us until we crossed over,

²⁴ so that all the peoples of the earth may know
that the hand of YHWH is mighty,
and so that you may fear YHWH your God forever.”

Through this week, we have been sitting with a simple, yet complicated question: God is speaking to me? It is quite a thing to contemplate and to sit with: God is speaking to me. It is a phrase just begging to be played with: God is speaking to me? *God is speaking*; to me. GOD is speaking to me? God is Speaking to me? God is speaking to us? It could go on and on. It's a heady place to start, and really deserves to be freed from a question mark at all. As bold as it may seem, this is where we must always start: we have a God who not only speaks into the world, but speaks into our lives time and again. This is nothing I can prove logically, argue beyond a shade of doubt, or demonstrate conclusively, despite my contention that this statement is absolutely true. I can give you the whole list of scripture texts that undergirds all of this, which could be enlightening. But at the end of the day, this is one of things that we are invited to take on faith, and is lived out by experience. Most of the time, I have to say that it is generally in hind sight that I find myself recognizing what God has said to me with clarity and conviction, even as I follow my best sense of the Lord's leading in day to day life. This foundational notion—that God has something to say and is saying it, even now—is where every conversation of faith must start—with the relationship that makes all of the difference. More to the point, I tend to think that God is always working, always speaking; it is we who often need to be reminded that this is so, opening our ears to hear what might be being said.

We all come with baggage. Individually and together, we have that which we carry from the past and into the present. Much of what we carry with us is good and helpful: our heritage and traditions, the deep histories of who and what we are, the ways that we worship, the histories that have brought us to this moment. Other parts of our baggage bear the scrapes and bruises of the journey that has brought us: the words that lodged deeply, or worse yet unspoken, the hurts of relationships strained, the loses and changes from year to year, month to month. Like so much of this baggage, there is a story to be told based on the fragments left behind, describing where we have been, suggesting where we are going.

On my night stand sits, always, a dusty, unused box. I have had it since High School. This is where my knick knacks reside. Most of the stuff is out of sight and out of mind, and woefully out of date. This Ohio tie pin speaks both of when I along with my brother were recognized as newspaper carriers of the year for the state, and how often I wear ties as it is still newly wrapped.

The spinning eyeball keychain from who knows where. A piece of gravel from my very first trip as a kid to Arizona. These beads I guess from some pseudo Mardi Gras celebration or another. And then all of these pictures, back when taking and printing senior pictures was the thing to do. My friend Gary played drums in marching band with me. The guy in yellow used to stuff my locker recreationally, and signed the back “don’t slobber on this”. We were better friends than what it sounds, but that is a story for another day; not all of these pictures are happy memories. Most of these pictures, long out of date I need to stare at for several seconds or longer before I can put a name to the face, and remember the context of what is going on there. On it goes in my little box of knick knacks. This is where I put my baggage, my mementos (though it is lacking most of what I now value in many ways—I have to fix that).

I am guessing that many of us have a box like this somewhere in our lives, those places where we keep the fragments that connect us however vaguely into the past. On the face of it, this is what our baggage does for us—connect us—some say bind us—to the past and weigh us down. In our reading for this morning, the people of Israel finally cross into the promised land. 40 years of wondering in the wilderness has concluded with Moses dying just before receiving the reward that he long sought. Now Joshua takes up the mantle and leads the people into the Promised Land. Their entry into the land of Milk and Honey directly echoes their exit from Egypt, crossing the Jordan on dry ground with the whole of the party coming across and past the arc of the covenant, though not without some souvenir hunting: one stone for each of the tribes of Israel to be erected as an icon of the time and place where God acted for God’s people. This was explicitly meant, as the story says many times, that when future generations will ask after the meaning of these stones, we might tell the story of God’s action in this time and place. This simple action of marking a place and time points toward the future to connect that generation to that which God has done.

Conventional wisdom when it comes to our baggage—literal or metaphorical—is that more of it that can be tucked away out of sight, or better yet, left behind all together, the better off we are. We North Americans are not a people given to memorializing our history. There is a certain pride in the art of reinvention—of the stories of those who dropped everything that came before, came to the new world and made something here, and continue to reinvent themselves while they

are at it every couple of generations or so. Within the church generally, we have traded the traditions of “well, this is the way we have always done what we do” for answering the questions from one generation to the next of why it is we do what we do in the first place. Sometimes, we have been so keen to hide the less savoury portions of our history—the structural sins, the inclinations toward tight, closed communities—that we have offered those coming on behind us a good deal more tradition (we do what we do because we do it that way) than the stories of God’s movement in our midst, describing the Love of God and the faithfulness to the way of Christ that has brought us to be where we are.

We need these stories of faith. We need to tell each other the how and why of our faith and what brings US to respond to God’s voice, because it is in that telling, it is in that recounting of what God has done for us, around us and in us that we give witness to the way that God is speaking even today. So much of what makes and marks our faith is the stuff of memory, of recalling God’s role in the world, and bringing to mind the ways the God has led us in the past, and will lead us in the future. We need our baggage both to sort out that which brings us to the place of recollection of what God has done, but also to bring us to consider what, possibly God is inviting us to unpack and process, and what might just need to be left behinds all together. Often times, it is the rear view mirror of that which we have seen and heard in the past that gives us the ability to hear and listen in the present, answering again and again—what do these stones mean to you—and in answering hearing God’s fresh invitation all over again.

Is processing our baggage easy? Of course not; it never is. And, to be clear, I am not suggesting some winking agenda that I think we as Jubilee must undertake. But when we bring our baggage before the cross, bring out all the God has done in us, through us, and in spite of us individually and collectively, we are better able to open ourselves to the very real voice of God with us; Immanuel, in the here and now calling us forward. Because that is the way with us: often we must remember where we have been and the way God has acted in order to be given the imagination for the possible ways God will act in the future. Our baggage is not just that which would slow us down and stand in our way. Our baggage—all of it—is our stones of remembrance, our witnesses to God’s working, especially as we place that which we carry at the

foot Cross. For it is here that this is redeemed, renewed, and made whole again as the speaking God speaks yet again.

What about you? What do you carry in you box of memories? What witnesses to the work of God in your life? How do you find yourself listening for the voice of God in the here and now?