

years ago, on a vacation with his wife and children through New England, he detoured to show them the Saratoga Monument. He was looking forward to revisiting this boyhood spot, especially since none of his family had seen it.

It was a hot day when they arrived. They were bumping along in an old motorhome in which the air conditioning had quit. Everyone was sweaty and tired from long hours of travel. The kids were seated in the vehicle at a table playing cards. When Joe urged them to get out to see the obelisk, the kids merely glanced out the window, said something about it being just another monument, and went back to playing cards. Joe's wife told him to go ahead and have a look; she'd wait in the vehicle with the kids. She was more interested in where they were going to camp that night and whether it would have a pool where the kids could swim.

Somewhat deflated, Joe says that he walked alone to the massive structure, consoling himself with the knowledge that at least he'd be able to climb the staircase and see the surrounding countryside again. But no. When he got to the door, he found it locked. The park had closed for the day a few minutes before they'd arrived. Driving away, Joe thought how no one in his family looked at the monument for what it was intended to memorialize. To his kids, it was just another pile of stones. To his wife, it was an interruption in getting the family settled for the night. Even to Joe himself, the monument stood not for the soldiers who died in 1777, but as a touchstone to the happy times of his childhood.

If those who built the monument could have asked Joe and his family members what the monument meant to them, they'd have likely been disappointed in the answers. But this is what tends to happen to monuments over the passage of time. They become detached from the events that led to their creation. Consider Memorial Day itself: it's a day to remember fallen soldiers who died serving their country. Yet for many of us, it's simply a day off work, the start of the summer season. Each year, the crowds that gather in cemeteries to honor the dead get a little smaller. Some memorials, it seems, lose their impact over time.

Joshua 4:4-7 speaks of a memorial. The people of Israel were on the final leg of their journey to the Promised Land. One final barrier lay before them: the Jordan River. God instructed Joshua to send the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant into the river. As

soon as their feet touched the water, the river parted, and it remained parted while the entire horde of Israel crossed on the dry riverbed.

This was an event worth memorializing, and God told Joshua to have one man from each of the 12 tribes take a stone from the riverbed and carry it onto the riverbank on the side of the newly entered territory. There, Joshua heaped the 12 stones up as a memorial, a monument to commemorate God's intervention, parting the river for the people. Notice Joshua's closing words: "So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

Perhaps predictably, subsequent generations of Israelites did not always care about the things their ancestors' monuments symbolized. Like with Joe and his family, nobody was asking, "What do those stones mean?" The same trend continues today regarding our memorials as new generations come along. Since they were not part of the events and factors that were important to their parents' and grandparents' generations, it's common for the younger cohorts not to assign those things the same value.

That became a real problem for Israel. Succeeding generations showed less interest in what the stones represented; they were just piles of rock. Despite Joshua's hope that subsequent generations would ask, "What do those stones mean?" few did, and one of God's chief charges against the people of Israel was, "They have forgotten me" (e.g., Jer. 18:15; Ez. 22:12).

The danger is that by ignoring history, we lose the benefits of learning from the past. We benefit from knowing what we as a people of this earth have gone through and where we as a people of faith have been. But, truly, the meaning of past events can't be quite the same for us as for those who lived through them. So our job is not to force our kids to bow at our memorials, but to do what we can to help them understand why they have meaning for us! We can help them see our piles of stones as memorials and as milestones on the journey of humankind. Every time we build a memorial, intentionally or otherwise, we can think of what it will mean both for the current generation and for the subsequent ones.

A memorial can celebrate heroic or happy events and can mourn tragic ones. Israel's 12 stones testified to the current generation that God helped and guided them. As a milestone to the next generation, it witnesses that people earlier received God's help, and gives those who weren't there a basis for concluding that they, too, may be helped by God.

A memorial can remind those who lived through the event of the terrible cost of war. As a milestone, it can cause subsequent generations to do all that is possible to avoid bloodshed. A memorial can promote healing for the people who were there or had loved ones there. Think of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the Oklahoma City National Memorial: as milestones, they teach that people can deal with emotional pain and continue to live.

A memorial can help the immediate generation realize that something significant happened that called for courage and sacrifice. As a milestone, it can communicate that each age has significant things that call for courage and sacrifice. Monument builders don't have the power to force others to honor the monuments themselves, but they can do their best to help them understand the milestone implications.

On a personal level, we want our children to see and understand what is important and valuable to us. We hope some of those things, including faith in God, will become of even greater value to them. But we don't want them bound or limited by our understandings and conclusions. We want what we have valued to inform them so they can go further, climb higher, and reach beyond.

So, as a monument-building generation, we ought to be less concerned that our monuments speak to the younger generations than that they understand why they speak to us. In time, they'll build their own monuments. But if we've been faithful in living up to the best our monuments represent, ours may serve as building blocks for theirs. And if you are in the generations coming on, don't be too quick to dismiss what may seem to be stuck-in-the-mud ways of doing things in the generations ahead of you. There are some values behind those things that in time, you're going to want to know about.

Prayer: God, companion and guide, we would be lost without your direction, wanderers in wildernesses of our own making. We praise you for dealing so graciously with your people in the past, when you guided them to freedom and a promised new life. We are heirs of that promise fulfilled in Jesus, our Redeemer and Lord. Through him, you have established for us a permanent direction for our lives and as we dwell in him, our lives are blessed with fruitfulness. Holy God, may this time of worship be a joyful response of praise and thanksgiving for all that you have done, for all that you are doing, and for all that you will continue to do for us and all people through the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Remember to Remember

Sunday, May 28, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Joshua 4:4-7

Human beings like to remember things...special things. We do so in remarkably creative ways. Just think of the memorials in Washington, D.C. alone! Former presidents Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington are remembered by monuments, statues and obelisks. Wars and the soldiers who died in them are remembered. Elsewhere around the country, tragic events are memorialized, like Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the 9/11 terror attacks. We've built these memorials so that we never forget.

Right here in Fergus Falls we have a memorial marker on the north side of Lake Alice that lists the names of residents who died during the cyclone of 1919. At Veteran's Park we have the names of our citizens who fought and died recorded in stone. And if you look around the church building you will find little brass plaques bearing the names of our spiritual ancestors whose families remembered them with gifts to the church. (I think older churches are held together by those little brass plaques!)

In addition to building things, we also set aside certain days to remember someone who meant a lot to our collective experience as Americans: presidents Lincoln and Washington, on President's Day in February, or Martin Luther King Jr. in January. In July we set aside a day to celebrate our independence. In November, we remember our veterans. And tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day to remember those who gave their lives to defend our freedom. Memorials are important reminders for us.

In the little town of Victory Mills, New York, there's a memorial called the Saratoga Monument. It celebrates the decisive win by the Americans over the British in the 1777 Battles of Saratoga during the American Revolutionary War. The monument is a majestic, imposing stone obelisk nearly 155 feet tall and there is a staircase that allows visitors to climb 190 steps to the top from which they can see grand views of the surrounding area.

Joe lived in nearby Saratoga Springs during his teen years. He and his friends used to ride their bicycles to the monument. He remembers climbing the staircase on more than one occasion. Joe's family moved to another state while he was still in high school, so a few