

Remember to Remember
Psalm 77:11-20 and Joshua 4:4-7
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Human beings like to remember things. In fact, we seem to have a built-in need to mark special occasions and turning points in our lives. And, we come up with all kinds of creative ways to do that.

Just think of all the memorials right in our backyard. Former presidents Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington are remembered in the nation's capital by monuments, statues and obelisks. Wars and the soldiers who died in them are remembered—World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Elsewhere in the country, tragic events are memorialized, like Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11. We've built these memorials so that we will never forget.

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, for example, in February; and Martin Luther King Jr. in January. In July we set aside a day to celebrate our independence. In November, we remember our veterans.

And, then, of course there's Memorial Day that we will celebrate tomorrow. Memorial Day is a federal holiday that is set aside to remember the people who died while serving our country as part of the armed forces. You might not know that it originated as Decoration Day in 1868, after the Civil War, to honor Union soldiers who gave their lives to fight against slavery. But after 50 years or so, the holiday was expanded to include all servicemen and women who lost their lives protecting our country.

In the little town of Victory Mills, New York, there is a memorial called the Saratoga Monument. It celebrates the decisive win by the Americans over the British in the 1777 Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolutionary War. The monument is a majestic, imposing stone obelisk standing nearly 155 feet tall. Work on it started 100 years after the battle it commemorates and there's a staircase inside that allows visitors to climb the 190 steps to the top.

Stan Purdum who was a colleague of mine while I was writing for the preaching journal, *Homiletics*, lived in nearby Saratoga Springs during his teenage

years. He tells the story of how he and his friends used to ride their bicycles to the monument and climb the steep staircase together. Stan's family moved to another state while he was still in high school, so a few years ago, on a vacation with his wife and children en route to 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, and everyone was sweaty and tired from long hours of travel. The kids were engrossed in a card game. When their dad urged them to get out to see the obelisk, they merely glanced out the window, said something about it being just another monument, and went back to their cards. Stan'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 they could swim.

Somewhat deflated, Stan says that he walked alone to the memorial, 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 just a few minutes before they'd arrived.

While driving away, Stan thought about how no one in his family had looked at the monument to see what it was intended to memorialize. To his kids, it was just another pile of stones like others they'd seen. To his wife, it was an interruption in getting the family settled for the night. And to Stan himself, the monument stood not for the brave soldiers who died there in 1777, but as a touchstone of happy times he'd had there as a kid. If those who built the monument could have asked Stan and his family what the monument meant to them, they'd likely have been disappointed in the answers.

But this is what tends to happen to monuments with the passage of time. They become detached from the events that led to their creation. In fact, think about 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, a holiday. We're focused on opening day at the pool and the BBQ we've planned, often without a single thought of those who lost their lives defending our freedoms.

That's exactly the situation Joshua and the Israelites faced. They were finally, finally on the last leg of their journey to the Promised Land after fleeing

from slavery in Egypt. 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 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 of their new land. There, Joshua heaped the 12 stones into a pile as a memorial—a monument—to commemorate God’s intervention, parting the river for them. Notice Joshua’s closing words: “So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.” *Forever*. Yeah, right, like that is going to happen.

Perhaps, predictably, subsequent generations of Israelites did not always care about the things their ancestors’ monuments symbolized. Like with Stan and his family, nobody was asking, “What do these stones mean?”

We see the same thing happening today. New generations come along that were not part of the events that were important to their parents and grandparents, so it’s common for younger folks not to assign those things the same value.

That became a problem for Israel. Despite the various monuments the people of one generation erected, the next generation invariably was less interested in what the stones represented. For some, they became nothing but piles of rock.

Joshua may have hoped that subsequent generations would ask, “What do those stones mean?” But, many of the newcomers didn’t bother. In fact, one of God’s chief charges against the people of Israel was, “They have forgotten me.” (Jeremiah 18:15, Ezekiel 22:12)

Before we bemoan this failure to remember, let’s acknowledge that it’s probably not even reasonable to expect something that commemorates a value or event for one generation to have the same meaning for later generations who weren’t even born when the event happened. I remember like it was yesterday where I was and what I was doing when 9/11 occurred, but I was a toddler when JFK was shot, so that event never registered for me as having the same kind of significance it had for my parents.

Still, we don’t want to ignore history, because in the process we lose the opportunity to learn from the past. We benefit from knowing what we have gone through and where we have been as a people. And, that’s true for us as people of

faith just as it is true for us as citizens of our respective countries or as citizens of the earth.

Here's the key: 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 try to force or guilt the younger generation to bow at our memorials, but instead to share why they have meaning for us. We can help them see our piles of stones, both literally and figuratively, as the milestones of our own journeys.

In other words, we can think of what it will mean both for the current generation as well as the ones that will come after us. The meanings will be different, but that doesn't make them less valid. For example,

- Israel's 12 stones testified to the current generation that God helped them and guided them. As a milestone to the next generation, it witnesses that people earlier were helped, and gives those who weren't there a basis for believing that they, too, can be helped by God.
- A memorial that commemorates a war can remind those who lived through it of the event itself and of the terrible cost of bloodshed. As a milestone to subsequent generations, it can serve as a reminder that we should do all that is possible to avoid more loss of life.
- Memorials such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Oklahoma City National Memorial can help promote healing for people who were there or had loved ones there. As milestones, they teach us that we can deal with emotional pain and come through it stronger.
- A memorial can recall for the immediate generation that something significant happened that called for courage and sacrifice. As a milestone, it can communicate that every age has significant challenges that call for courage and sacrifice from them.

Monument builders don't have the power to force others to honor the monuments themselves, but they can do their best to help people understand the significant implications that led to their existence.

On a personal and faith level, we want our children to see and understand what is important and valuable to us. We hope some of those things, including our faith in God, will become of significant value to them. But, we don't want them bound or limited by our understandings and conclusions. We want what we have to inform them so they can go further, reach higher, come to embrace a faith that makes their lives meaningful and purposeful. Our job as parents and grandparents,

aunts and uncles, teachers and mentors is to be less concerned that our monuments speak to others in the same way they speak to us and instead, to share why and how they speak to us. What are those important moments when we encountered God? How has God led us, spoken to us, comforted us, redeemed us, allowed us to grow? What impact did it have on us? How have we remembered those times through the years?

And, then, we need to trust that they will build their own monuments. And if we've been faithful in living up to the best our monuments represent, ours may serve as building blocks for theirs.

For those who are in the generations coming on, your job is not to be too quick to dismiss what may seem to be old way of seeing or doing things. There are some values behind those things that in time, you're going to want to know about and remember for yourselves. Amen.