

Joshua 4:1-9

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: ‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, “Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.” ’ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. 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, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” 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 for ever.’

The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

Sermon

In our passage for today, the twelve tribes of Israel make a memorial. This pile of stones is a reminder of their time in Egypt, their 40 year journey through the wilderness, and their entry into the promised land. A reminder that their lives have not always been the same as they are today. It is a monument to help them tell the story of their history.

History is a complicated thing. They say that if you ever want to hear 5 different sides to a story that all you’ve got to do is get 3 historians in a room and let them go!

Because the reality is that history is a growing and changing thing. If we’re doing our history in a good and healthy way, then we’ll strive to include everyone’s experience of it and everyone’s

interpretation of it. When God designs this monument - he does so in a way that includes everyone. Each of the 12 tribes are told to take a stone that will represent them, and include it in the monument. And no one is left out. And over time our perspective will widen and new understandings of our story will come to light, I'm sure that each time the Israelites explained this stone monument to their children, they told the story in a little different way and each retelling adds depth and meaning - and the ways we tell our history and memorialize it will also change as we strive to tell the truth of our history ever more fully.

I grew up in a town called Charlottesville, Virginia. The people of Charlottesville love their history. But, a few years ago, their perspective of that history began to expand. The ways they thought about their history began to change as they finally started to include the stories of people who had been enslaved there. And as they approached a fuller version of the truth, they realized in this new, more honest telling of their history, the people that they wanted to celebrate from their past had changed. And that was tough and complicated, because when they were telling their history from only one side of the story, they had built monuments to two different Confederate generals - people who had fought for the ability to keep slavery legal. But, now they had different heroes, and they wanted to take these old monuments down.

I have been reading a little about trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder lately and one of the things that has stuck with me is the way that people who are experiencing PTSD get stuck in re-living the traumatic experience that they went through. Doctors say that PTSD isn't just about how extreme your trauma was or how horrible the thing that happened to you was, but what matters is what you do with your story afterward. PTSD is a sign that you haven't really dealt with the fullness of what happened to you. Healing from trauma comes when we can find a way to look at it in a different light, to see it from someone else's perspective, to get the bigger picture. And when you look back upon that traumatic event, rather than just reliving your trauma, you can find a way to learn from it, to make meaning of it, to grow from it.

You might have heard on the news what happened next in Charlottesville, after they decided to take those old Confederate statues down. It got ugly, because some people showed up who were still stuck in just one way of retelling their story. They were still trying to relive the civil war, and hoping for a different outcome. And they came to town wanting to stop everyone else from growing out of that old way of understanding their history. They tried to hold them back from entering into a place where they could tell the whole truth of their history and what that war had meant to all the people who lived there. They were so afraid of what memorializing this fuller version of the truth might bring that they came with weapons to intimidate and attack anyone who wanted to push them out of their comfort zone and toward the uncomfortable, but essential work of real growth and healing. They had this big, ugly rally. You might have heard about this a couple years ago. It was awful. They tried to stop the process of the town's healing of their racist past. But, they couldn't stop them. Because God continued to call the churches and the people of that town to do the work of reckoning with their history, telling the truth, and moving toward healing and reconciliation together.

This coming week marks an important memory in the history of the city we live in together. July 20 is a date that Aurora has memorialized. It is the 8th anniversary of the Aurora Theater Shooting, an important event in our history, a tragedy, a trauma in our community. (Do you know about this? In 2012 a young man went into a movie theater with guns and shot everyone he could see - and it was on the news across the country.)

And we've tried to memorialize it here, in a variety of ways. In the days after the shooting, a little makeshift memorial was set up across the street from where it happened. And crosses were placed for those who were killed. And candles were lit for those who mourned. And notes and signs were written with words of consolation.

And then one day, someone folded a little paper crane, as a sign of their hope that the people who were affected by this trauma might find healing. And then another crane was folded and

another. And they were sent in the mail from people all over the world. From parents and kids, from Christians and Buddhists, from victims of other shootings or people who had seen the trauma of bombings and war.

And when the time came for our community to build a new monument in 2018, people remembered the hope that had come to them on the wings of those little paper cranes. And they built a monument to memorialize, not just the death and the suffering, not just the fear and the anger, or just the sadness and the pain - but a bigger, fuller story of what had happened to us, that included the healing and the hope and the help we got from others.

When the Israelites in our scripture were making a monument to their history - when they were looking for a way to remember the trials and tribulations of their time in slavery in Egypt, and their journey through the wilderness, and this dangerous river crossing they had to make before they could come into the promised land - they chose very specific rocks to make their monument - they went to the middle of the river. They went to that most dangerous place in the crossing, that place where they had been most afraid. And when their children asked them what those stones had meant, they would remember that it was just there in that most dangerous place that the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And in those days, it was thought that within that ark, lived the very presence of God. So they would tell their children that God had gone with them into the danger and the uncertainty of that day, how he had held back those raging rivers from overwhelming us, and how he brought us through together to find promised land.

Like the Israelites, who chose their stones from just where God had been with them, our community built a monument of 13 cranes flying up to heaven and 70 more cranes that still fly through our neighborhoods today. They represent the 13 people who died and the 70 who were injured. They tell the true story of our trauma, but also the true story of the ways we are recovering together. They show the bigger picture and point toward who that trauma has made us and the meaning we are making from it.

Because each year on this anniversary, the victims of that shooting and the families of those who were lost still make paper cranes. But now, they weave them into wreaths and put them in the mail. They send them to other communities that have been victim to shootings and trauma.

We've sent them to Las Vegas and New York City, to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and the West Freeway Church of Christ. They made them for police officers who responded to the theater shooting 8 years ago, because they know they've suffered this trauma too. They've sent them to Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and Christ Church in New Zealand. They've sent out more than I care to name, because the truth is that there is still too much violence in our world. But, through this project, God has made another monument, just like those rocks by the side of the Jordan river. God has made Aurora, Colorado into a living monument, one that proclaims there is more to the story. That even in the midst of the trauma, God was there. That together, we can heal from our traumas, and with God's help we can use the stories of what we have been through to help put an end to violence and learn to live together in peace.

Amen.

This sermon was first shared with Aurora First Presbyterian Church, by Rev. Doug Friesema. To receive future communications from the church, please contact:

firstauroraoffice@gmail.com

(303) 364-2609

1585 Kingston St.

Aurora, CO 80010

Aurorafpchurch.com

facebook.com/aurorafpchurch