

A MEMORIAL,

A PROMISE

by Rev. Alan Hawkins



Memorials are powerful devices. They are standing records that draw back to the mind something or someone of great importance, the legacy of which often has deep impact on those remembering. There are all kinds of memorials--public and private, shared or personal--commemorating events, places, or people. Contrary to expectation, in Joshua 4:2-3, God calls his people to memorialize as they are coming into the land rather than after they have taken possession of it.

When we think of the Promised Land, its descriptor as "a land flowing with milk and honey" might come easily to mind (Exodus 3:17). But the fertility and richness of this land is something that would have to be acquired through work, stewardship, sacrifice, innovation, problem-solving, ingenuity, and skill.

Before beginning the work of establishing the land, the Israelites follow God's instruction to gather stones from the Jordan.

Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, 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 before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever (Joshua 4:5-7).

This memorial gave them a visible sign of who they are (the 12 tribes of Israel) and what God had done for them (rescued from Egypt and delivered to a land of their own). Even the act of gathering the stones from the Jordan in Joshua 4 is a picture of this reality: the Israelites were a people buried under injustice and pain and He parted the waters to uncover them and draw them out to a new life.

We are used to memorials being reflections of a past person or event, not a tribute of something to come. This tribe of people had no idea what the future held, or what lay before them in physical space or in time. So why would God prioritize the building of this structure before the people of Israel had put down roots and started building in the land? Perhaps in part, this act was symbolizing the truth that God's future and ongoing promise to his people was not contingent on what the Israelites had done or would do. It was a memorial of what had been done for them as well as what would be done for them despite (sometimes in spite of) their flawed and sinful nature. As they were invited to participate in God's work, the Israelites were given rules and guidelines that could lead them into a flourishing life and fruitful labor alongside God. But the future would come to pass regardless of the choices his people would most certainly make. When God establishes something, it is a sure and lasting thing.

With one stone representing each tribe, the memorial was also a physical representation of those whom God had chosen for the work to come. This pattern of 12 is reminiscent of a story from Nehemiah when the Israelites are rebuilding the city gates after they had been decimated (chapter 8). The tribes each claim a gate along the wall and take responsibility for rebuilding it. In this act, they not only share the burden of repairing the wall, but each tribe does so in their individual way. Some of these walls are standing today and they are still differentiated by how they were built--the unique characteristics of each tribe still recognizable. God's chosen people may have been one nation, but this group was made up of individuals, each loved and valued by the Creator with something special to contribute to God's work.

When I think about our work to establish the land we've been given at New Garden Park, I think about the unique contributions of the "tribes" here at Church of the Redeemer. In the last issue of *The Table*, we heard from some of the folks who have adopted pieces of the property to rebuild with their particular passions and skills--the medicinal garden, the fountain, the front flower beds. Our new pizza oven is a more recent example of the unique touches of the "tribes" of Redeemer at work on the property.

New Garden Park is a gift that is fertile with possibility and blessing, but it is going to require the varied talents and gifts within our parish to draw this wealth forth. The next season of cultivating this property will be focused on what will be the "park" area of the Parish/Park/Farm/Abbey vision. It is intentional that part of this building plan is to construct a memorial garden, built by the people of Redeemer as a reflection of the multifaceted Body of Christ that is stewarding this place. Building this memorial garden is two-fold in purpose: to remind us of who we are and of what God has done for us, but also to represent God's promise for New Garden Park and recognize that the work done here is for him. Whoever we are and whatever we do, he is in control and will bring to pass that which he desires. This should fill us with hope and comfort, to know that our hands are invited to take part in a divine calling with eternal impact, but that he will use both our triumphs and our failures in the process of establishing this land.

A few years ago, Angela Kaye and I got to visit Israel. We witnessed firsthand that although it is a very fertile place, it requires labor to draw forth and enjoy the wealth of the land. I remember this as I consider what lies before us as we begin to "establish the land" at New Garden Park. We need your hands, your dreams, your inspiration, your participation. We have financial commitments to begin building the Park (and will always happily accept more generosity); now is the time for the hands and feet to remove gravel, build fencing, lay brickwork (we already have the bricks for this job!), clear land, and plant trees. All we have is from the Lord and we are trusting him to provide. Will you add your stone to this memorial?