

*When the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD came up from the middle of the Jordan, as soon as the soles of their feet reached dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and it overflowed all its banks as before. <sup>19</sup> The people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month and set up camp at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. <sup>20</sup> Those twelve stones that they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. <sup>21</sup> He said to the people of Israel, “When your children in the future ask their fathers, ‘What are these stones?’ <sup>22</sup> you shall teach your children, ‘On dry land Israel crossed over this Jordan.’ <sup>23</sup> For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan in front of you until you crossed over, just as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up in front of us until we had crossed over. <sup>24</sup> He did this so that all the peoples of the earth would know that the hand of the LORD is strong, so that you would fear the LORD your God always.”*

Monuments tell the story. Yes, sometimes, they tell a history that we would rather deny or forget, but most often, they tell the story of great moments, history altering events, or multi-generational influencing people. While certainly acknowledging the frailties and sinful natures of humanity, monuments like the Lincoln Memorial, the Eiffel Tower, or even the pyramids of Egypt all bear witness to earthly “greatness.”

But did you ever consider the walls of this gathering space a monument? I mean, if these walls and halls could talk, what stories could they tell!?! Perhaps family stories like a great-grandmother at the baptism of a great-grandchild. Maybe stories of a little child singing her heart out during a Christmas service. The stories of a victory service where family gathers to sing of triumph in Jesus even through tears of grief. Great moments, great events, great people, great-ness.

Yet so different than the Lincoln Memorial or the Great Pyramids of Egypt, not so? And you know why: these are stories of the Spirit, stories of his gracious power unleashed in places like New Life where the Word of Life brings rescue and hope, joy and peace, confidence and comfort. Stories that go back more than 30 years in this community.

Of course, no church or school was ever erected to “house” our Lord God. Scripture declares, and you believe, that **the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.** Yet this building of wood and concrete is much like a pile of stones erected on a riverbank so far away and so long ago. It is a living testimony to the power and grace of our living God. But it remains a testimony only when there is a message connected with the memorial, a message that explains a marvelous past.

Historically, understand that these Israelites in our text for today, standing on the shores of the Jordan River, grew up wandering in the wilderness. While they were aware of their history, most of them did not know slavery, had not experienced the plagues, had not walk through the Red Sea on dry ground. Oh, they all knew the stories from their parents and grandparents, but their entire experience was limited to the Sinai wilderness and 40 years of wandering made possible by manna and quail and water.

And now, as they step out in faith into the flood stage waters of the churning Jordan river, God intervenes with a mighty hand for his people, in a way not unlike the miraculous events of generations before. We’re told in chapter 3 that **The waters piled up in one heap, very far away...The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel was crossing over on dry ground, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.** I imagine that some of those Israelites walking over the solid river bottom could not help but remember the stories told around desert campfires of the crossing of the Red Sea so long ago. And so that the

next generations might never forget God's mighty hand, Joshua, at God's command, had a tribal representative from each tribe go into the riverbed and take a large stone. This pile of 12 stones would be a lasting teaching tool at what one might call *Gilgal National Park*. **He did this so that all the peoples of the earth would know that the hand of the LORD is strong, so that you would fear the LORD your God always.**

Of course, if you know your Israelite history – actually, you only need to know your own history – you know that while sinful human beings are looking at a monument, in the moment, we are appreciative, thankful, even moved at times to some sort of short-term change. But ask us about it a few weeks later, a few days later, even a few hours later, and all that appreciation, thanksgiving, and spiritual resolve has likely diminished, or more likely still, may be nearly gone.

Yes, it's a marvelous past, to be sure, when we consider the Lord's intervention in the ministry and lives of the people of New Life congregation. I mean, what do these "stones" say to us? God has been active here. Through faithful preaching and teaching (in pulpit and classroom), generations have been taught to look past self and focus on the Savior. This family of faith has been able to watch God work through the means of grace. New lives are brought forward to the Spirit's font of life. This family of faith watches as children are nurtured in the Spirit's factory called a Lutheran Sunday School, as they stand before the altar and confess Jesus as Lord in their confirmation. This family of faith watches as couples shout to the world that true love flows from the cross, not from the heart, as they begin a lifelong journey together with Jesus. This family of faith gathers to celebrate victory after victory when Jesus calls our brothers and sisters in the faith home to eternal glory. Look at this pile of stones called our church. It is a testimony pile, a cold stone witness that God has and is at work here.

And yet, sometimes even before we have even walked out those doors, we have already forgotten. Appreciation for God's

goodness in our lives is replaced by complaining. Thanksgiving for God's saving intervention in our lives is overwhelmed by demands for more. A desire for change in ourselves is replaced by an apathy for the God's ministry and mission. And that's *just* when Satan would have us think that the best is in the past.

In the closing verses of the Book of Hebrews, the writer encourages, **Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Carefully consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.** (13:7,8) We celebrate God's grace in the life of one such leader today, Martin Luther. 500 years ago, this past May, he stood before some of the most powerful people in the world at the Diet of Worms. Called on to retract and deny his many writings founded on the Scriptural teaching of salvation by grace through faith, and NOT by works, it must have seemed to all the world that the best from God was in the past, that the world was finally getting the better of the truth, that a faithful witness was being silenced.

And yet, by grace, through faith in Jesus, we know that the best is always yet to come. As Joshua did, as Luther did, as we do still today, we walk with Jesus, the Captain of Salvation, the One who crushed the serpent's head for all time, the One who came to wash our sins from God's memory, not as a monument to our failings, but as a witness to our eternal salvation. He says, **You are forgiven. I will remember your sins no more.** And these stones, this church, is a stone cold witness that even as you wait for Jesus to come again at the end of time, he comes to you again and again each day with his forgiving, reviving, strengthening Word in your hearts and homes.

But who will tell the next generation in our churches and schools? Who will witness to the lost of the saving name of Jesus in the 54 countries we, as a church body, are working to serve? **...how can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without a preacher?** <sup>15</sup> **And how can**

***they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news of peace, who preach the gospel of good things!”***

(Romans 10:14,15)

You may already know the urgent need for workers. Well over 100 pulpits in our churches are vacant, with some congregations calling for a year or even two before receiving a pastor. Teacher shortages in some areas now hamper our ministry and limit our reach with the gospel. Our synod has even had a request to start a high school in a foreign country, teaching our own curriculum—no strings attached. But we don't have the teachers. We have received requests from almost 3000 individuals from around the world who want to be trained for ministry. That's 30 times the size of our typical enrollment at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Opportunity abounds! But do we have the workers?

At the end of today's service, Mike Valleau will be giving a brief presentation about the current efforts at Martin Luther College to address the need. Martin Luther College is your College of Ministry, training pastors and teachers and staff ministers. The college is named for the Great Reformer Martin Luther, not in honor to him, but to God's grace in his life, and, because ***Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever***, the college is named for God's grace in his life and in appreciation, in thanksgiving, for God's grace in ours.

Martin Luther College has begun a two-year campaign entitled “Equipping Christian Witnesses.” The first pillar of this campaign

is recruitment. Under God and by the Spirit's power, can we want to increase enrollment by 35% in the next four to five years. With such numbers we can better serve the needs of our dying world. And if we recruit students, we can best retain them with increased financial aid and enhanced facilities. I ask you to carefully read the campaign materials and then to pray boldly. I ask you to lovingly encourage daughters and sons of our congregation to consider ministry. I ask you to pray for ministry students, including our own Matthew Zeng, Bethany Valleau, Kendra Valleau, and Grant Gawrisch. I ask you to continue to support our Christian education fund through which we directly assist these students with their education. I ask you to consider special gifts to support the Equipping Witnesses Campaign.

What a privilege of grace to be called as an instrument of the Spirit to bring the Word of Life and to impact a heart for all eternity. Children of God, we follow the Miracle Worker. God has given us everything we need to carry his gospel forward. We have the Word. Let's stand at the stones and confess our sins of selfishness and doubt, of fear and worry. Let's stand at the stones and rejoice in God's power to save. Let's stand at the stones and dedicate ourselves anew. And when your children and grandchildren ask, “What do these stones mean?” Tell them. Tell them about the saving activity of the Lord Jesus Christ in our midst. Tell them that they, too, can be messengers of the victory only Jesus brings. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Martin Luther College Equipping Christian Witnesses resources. (<https://mlc-wels.edu/ecw-sunday/>)