

Joshua 4: 1-7 When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: ²“Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³and 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.’” ⁴Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵Joshua 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, ⁶so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ ⁷then 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 forever.”

One of my favorite things to do is to hike. I love being in nature, surrounded by the beauty of God’s creation. I love the challenge of climbing a mountain or the serenity of simply strolling by a lake. My very first trip to New England was actually a hiking trip some twenty years ago when I went with my brother and several friends on a 3 night backpacking trip in the Presidential range in New Hampshire where among other peaks, we would climb Mt. Washington.

For those of you who’ve hiked in New Hampshire, you know that once you get to a fairly high elevation, you are above tree line and very exposed to the weather. Now, on most trails, the way you know you’re on the trail is that the path is sort of surrounded by trees on both sides usually making the trail obvious. But there is also the trail blaze, a little straight line painted on trees in the color of the trail every 100 yards or so. If the trail is not obvious, you just look at the trees, and, usually at eye level, it’s not hard to find the painted blaze letting you know which way to go. But that doesn’t work when you get above tree line because, well, there are no trees to paint on. And especially being at a place known for the worst weather in the world, you often can’t see more than a few feet in front of you as fog has set in and it’s often raining pretty hard. There are no trees or painted blazes to guide you. The trail is on top of rocks and doesn’t look any different than the rocks all around you. The only way to know if you are going in the right direction is something called cairns. A cairn is just a big pile of rocks.

And cairn’s are the only reason we, or anyone for that matter, could climb a mountain like Mt. Washington. You see, if the weather is clear, a hike above tree line is pretty easy. You can see your destination the entire way. The view is endless. But in rain and fog, without the cairn, it would be impossible to know which way is which. But they have made the cairns big enough and close enough, that no matter how foggy it is, no matter how rainy it is, you can find your way. You see, you don’t have to be able to see the top of the mountain, you only have to be able to find the next pile of rocks and you know you’re on the right path.

Our Scripture today is also about a pile of rocks. Our Scripture this weeks marks the end of a journey that began with the people crossing through the waters of the Red Sea and ended with them crossing through the waters of the Jordan River into the promised land. The journey began with the escape from slavery in Egypt, to wondering in the wilderness for 40 years, to

periods of doubt where the people wanted to go back to Egypt only each time to find that God had provided for them, to finally crossing the river into the Promised Land. Crossing the Jordan marked a major turning point for the Hebrew people. They now had a home of their own – they were no longer wondering nomads. They now could build their own society where no one would be in need, where no one would be a slave – they were no longer oppressed in Egypt. This was one of the most seminal moments for the Hebrew people and so God asked them to make an altar to remember.

So they did...taking 12 stones and piling them up, one after the other, they made their own cairn, their own altar to remember where they had come from and to continue to guide them as they built a new community together. But here's the thing – my guess is building an altar when they had just crossed the Jordan was a cool thing to do, but they didn't really need it then. They had just witnessed first-hand the power of God. The river had dried up and they had crossed onto dry land. They didn't need an altar to remind them of what God had done because they had just experienced God's amazing power.

There's two ways of thinking about altars or about worship for that matter. One way is that altars exist for the sake of God. In its crudest form, sacrifices must be made on the altar to appease a God who apparently is so insecure that God must have a blood sacrifice to be happy. But that's not the God we believe in. More specifically, that's not who Jesus has shown God to be. In Jesus, we learn that God is the one – not who craves sacrificial praise, but one who sacrifices for us...not one who lords power over us but one who empties God-self of power in becoming one of us. In other words, God doesn't need our worship or our praise for God's own sake. We don't build altars like they are some sort of tribute to our ruler – you know sort of like the pictures of dictators that are displayed.

Rather, we worship, we make altars because we need to. Our passage ends by saying that the stones would be a memorial for the Israelites forever. They would help them remember what God has done and where God has brought them. And that would be really, really important for the people because you see, God's power and God's presence would not always be as obvious for them as it was when they crossed the Jordan River.

As the people settled in the land, they would try to build a society different from that of Egypt. But they would mess up. Like Pharaoh, their kings would seek to make their descendants into slaves again – even using slave labor to build the temple. The oppression would lead to Civil War and the people of Israel, so united in crossing the Jordan River, would be divided north and south – 2 kingdoms instead of one. Their enemies would attack them and they would be carried off into exile. The temple would be destroyed and Jerusalem would be burnt to the ground.

There would be plenty of times when God's presence did not always seem so near for the people. In fact, at times the people felt God had utterly abandoned them as the writer of Psalm 22 cries out:

“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

It's the same Scripture that Jesus quoted on the cross:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And if we're honest, we can all probably relate to those haunting words, that all of us, if we're honest, have a times wondered,

"God where are you?"

"God, have you abandoned me?"

"God, when are you going to act?"

We are depressed and feel alone – God where are you?

A loved one has received a devastating diagnosis of disease – God where are you?

A marriage that began with hopeful love has unraveled – God where are you?

A child, that we remember holding in our arms, rocking to sleep as a baby, now older keeps losing a battle with addiction – God where are you?

If you have ever found yourself asking those questions, you're in good company. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *An Altar in the World* writes, "You can get lost on your way home. You can get lost looking for love. You can get lost between jobs. You can get lost looking for God. However it happens, take heart. Others before you have found a way in the wilderness, where there are as many angels as there are wild beasts, and plenty of other lost people too. All it takes is one of them to find you. All it takes is you to find one of them. However it happens, you could do worse than to kneel down and ask a blessing, remembering how many knees have kissed this altar before you."

You see, in times of uncertainty, in times of sadness and doubt, in times when we may feel like giving up, those are the times when it's so important to remember what God has done. Last week, our theme was don't forget who you are – to remember that God has named each of us good, each of us as God's image no matter what other names we have been called. Today, our theme is not forget what God has done.

The first two days of our hike in New Hampshire, the mountain lived up to its reputation. It was cold, rainy, and were it not for the cairns we could not find our way. But then the third day, the clouds went away and we were able to see Mt. Washington in all its glory.

That day, we didn't need the cairns. We knew exactly where we were going. The path was clear and our view was gorgeous. But we also knew that the rain and fog would return and when it

did, we would need the cairns to guide us. But we also needed to remember the view because we needed to remember that when we were tired and didn't want to climb anymore, that when it was cold and rainy, that it would be more than worth it to keep going.

That's kind of how faith is. We have times when God's presence is so near and so beautiful and so powerful that we don't need anything to show us the way. And then we have times, when we wonder why we keep going at all.

It's those times, it's important to pay attention to the altars that are all around us so that we can make sure we don't forget all that God has done.