

Christ Lutheran Church, Santa Fe, NM
September 26, 2010
Faith Formation Weekend

First Reading: Joshua 4.1-8

Psalm 78.1-7

Second Reading: I Peter 2.4-5

Gospel: Matthew 16.13-19

Greetings and Intro

Earlier this week I stayed up quite late, unwinding from my flight home from CO and recording some thoughts, for my time with you. I crawled into bed about midnight. I could tell that Dick, my husband, was not asleep, as he was tossing and turning. (Whispering) *"Dick, this weekend when I'm in Santa Fe, the focus is on stones and rocks. They are dedicating an outdoor altar. The people of Christ Lutheran are bringing stones with them, stones they were each given during Lent."*

We found ourselves recalling and mentally trying to list all the Biblical stories involving Rocks. It is a great exercise - better than counting sheep! So now it is about 12:30am and we are having this deep, theological conversation. Well, maybe not so profound . . .

"Dick, you know the painting that hung above my parent's bed - the one with Jesus praying at a large rock in the Garden of Gethsemane? Is that the artist's idea or is the rock in the Biblical story?" The next morning we each had our Bibles out, racing one another to discover the answer. Luke does mention Jesus went a "stone's throw" away. But Matthew and Mark say Jesus fell to the ground. No rock in this story. I guess the artist did take some liberties.

But I can imagine that there were rocks amongst the olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. Rocks are a familiar part of the landscape in the Holy Land, not unlike here in Santa Fe. They were integral to the people's every day life. People depended on them for shelter, building material, fences and even pillows.

Have you ever stopped to think about how many of the biblical stories contain stones and rocks?

- In the Psalms God is referred to as our Rock and foundation.
- Bible characters often piled up stones and built altars wherever and whenever something important happened, like Noah did when the flood ended.

- In *Genesis 12* we have the wonderful story of Jacob, who uses a rock as a pillow for the night. (*I am sure he would have welcomed one of your many hand-made, colorful pillows.*) During Jacob's sleep God appears. It is such a profound experience that Jacob pours oil over the rock and dedicates it and his life to God.
- Moses wrote the laws on stone tablets.
- Water flows from rocks.
- People are punished and even killed with stones - which still happens in some parts of the world to day.
- In Luke "Stones cry out!"
- David felled the giant with a rock.
- In *Matthew* we are told to be like the wise person who built his house on a rock.
- In the story of all stories, one that is told in all four Gospels. The Story that defines who we are today as Christians - a large stone is mysteriously rolled away from a cave serving as a tomb.
- And later Simon, one of the disciples, is given a new name, "Peter," which means "Rock." And is told, "On you, I will build my church."

Linda's Story

My husband, Dick, has a shelf covered with rocks from our travels to "holy lands," some are from Israel, others from Egypt, Turkey and Germany. *This one is from the Jordan River. Dick kept this smooth, flat rock because he could imagine Jesus skipping a stone like this across the Jordan River. *This one from the Dead Sea. Dick has others, but of course they were much too heavy to bring along for today. They are a constant reminder of our travels, all we experienced in the places where God's word first came alive and where the Good News was first shared. We cannot pick one up that we don't begin to tell stories - God's stories and our own stories. (* Rocks shown to the congregation)

When our boys were small and even into their teen years, they collected rocks wherever we traveled. I am sure you or members of your family have done the same. We would return home with a shoe box of rocks collected from deserts, mt tops, river beds and places in-between. Some were chosen for their beauty, others for their shape. Each one was a reminder of the place we had traveled or a memorable experience on our journey.

In the mid-80's, when our sons were teenagers, we moved to AZ. Of course the rocks, and the shoe boxes which held them, were moved from the closets in the midwest to our new home in the desert where they were piled in our back yard. As we tried to figure out desert landscaping, the design of the back yard would change and the rocks were moved from place to place. We didn't really do anything special with them. They were

just there. For me, they were simply a reminder of our past travels and time spent together as a family.

One day I noticed the rocks were gone. I went rushing into the house, searching for Dick and frantically asking, "*What happened to the rocks?*" Dick looked at me quizzically, "*What rocks?*" I urgently explained, "*You know, the ones the boys collected over all the years, the ones that remind us our travels and our good times together.*" Dick responded, "*Oh, those. I gave them to Richard for the patio he's building. They were just a pile of rocks.*" I was devastated. How could he . . . didn't he share my fondness for them? The connection to good family times? Didn't he remember? But you see, the stones had lost their *shared* meaning for us. We had no established ritual of gathering and telling the stories, of remembering. The stones no longer served as a reminder of our journeys and travels. So they had become - just a pile of rocks.

God's Story

In the Book of Joshua, in the reading we heard earlier, we hear God command the 12 tribes of Israel to create a pile of large rocks beside the river Jordan, which they had just crossed. ". . . and when your children ask, you will tell them, the glorious deeds of the Lord." Did you hear that? YOU will tell them of God's rescue. Of how God saved you through the water.

Our text doesn't say, "Run, find Pastor Ben" or "Ask the Bible Class teacher to tell you the story." No! It is YOU - moms and dads, grandparents, godparents, uncles and aunts, friends and peers. YOU are to tell The Story, which is also your story.

The purpose of the pile of rocks was similar to a cairn or a marker on a trail - they pointed the way. The way to God's saving grace through the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the sea. The rocks were to serve as a reminder to generations to come, of God's presence and rescue, so God's children would not lose their way.

This week I read a report that said 70% of our youth who are of the Christian faith do not know the Bible stories. Nor the basic Christian narrative. I wonder if the statistics are that different for adults? Bible stories are not boring stories. There is blood, guts, tragedy, heroes, heroines and soap-box drama. There are no perfect people in the Bible, only people like you, and me.

It is why I love Storybook Bibles for everyone, regardless of age. Storybook Bibles get to the basic nuggets of the Christian faith narrative for our lives. And some would say that when we forget our God stories, we lose our way. We lose our identity. We no longer know who we are or whose we are. Maybe we simply need more rocks in our lives?

Christ Lutheran's Story

In the First Letter from Peter, Peter is writing to Christians scattered across Asia Minor with another reference to rocks, "Welcome to Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, the source of all life. And you, present yourselves as living stones for the construction of a sanctuary, vibrant with life." (The Message) When Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, which means Rock, and says, "on whom I will build my church," Jesus is referring to Peter as a building stone. Peter had recognized and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God!" And now Peter is encouraging these new Christians, through their baptism in Christ, to be living stones as well.

Seems like God has some kind of building project going on here. What an effective combination, "Stones" which are known to be solid, reliable and durable; and "Living" which infers growth, change, flexibility and adaptability.

In this time and in this place, in the midst of your loss of beloved saints and with some anxiousness about the future, wondering, "Will our faith have children?" God continues to call Christ Lutheran to be Living Stones. A church with a solid foundation and stories of God's active presence for almost 50 years. Yet flexible and open to the Holy Spirit's calling in the midst of a changing culture and times.

I know from my time with you and from what I have heard and known about your ministry, that these are living, breathing, vibrant walls. You are living stones who share with ALL people, through word and deed, the love and forgiveness we know through Jesus who died for our sins and gives us new life. The beloved saints of this congregation, who are no longer with you, remain living stones when you recall God's work through them and recount their faith-filled-ness to the next generation.

God knows none of us are perfect building stones. God knows that each one of us is broken and misshaped. Still, like Peter, we are called to be building stones. On you, and me, Christ continues to build this church - the public church called Christ Lutheran and the domestic church called home.

I encourage you to continue to equip parents, godparents, grandparents, all caring adults, and all generations to be the teachers of the faith, to know God's stories by heart. To tell of God's rescue and forgiveness through Jesus in daily life. Not just here, but within your homes, coffee shops, on the mesas and down the ski slopes.

My mother is 91 and lives in an assisted living facility in Iowa. When I visit, we always take time to visit the cemetery where my father is buried. We place flowers on his "memorial stone." And we remember. Depending on the time and the weather, we may walk further, stopping at the markers of my grandparents, great-grandparents, relatives

and friends - to remember. The memorial stones and the stories that accompany them are reminders of who I am and where I come from.

Remember the story of Hansel and Gretel and the crumbs they dropped in the forest so they could find their way home? God's stories are like that, they are the markers in our lives, so we can always, always find our way back. Back home to the open arms of a loving and forgiving God.

Let the rocks you carried from this altar into your homes at Lent, and now returned to dedicate the outdoor altar, symbolize the on-going connection between this congregation your households and community. Let these stones and those of your labyrinth, be a reminder of God's presence in your journeys, in the twists and turns, in the joys and failures, the confidence as well as very real doubts often lingering in our lives. A reminder of God's rescue and love for us through Jesus, a story households and the world are hungry to hear.

A Final Word

A reading from the Jesus Storybook Bible, "A dream of heaven" the Book of Revelation.

One day, John knew, Heaven would come down and mend God's broken world and make it our true, perfect home once again.

And John knew then that the ending of The Story was going to be so great, it would make all sadness and tears and everything seem like a shadow that is chased away by the morning sun.

"I'm on my way," said Jesus. "I'll be there soon!"

John came to the end of his book. But he didn't write "The End," Because of course, that's how stories finish. (And this one's not over yet.)

So instead, John wrote: "Come quickly, Jesus!"

Which, perhaps, is really just another way of saying . . . **To be continued** . . .

Because you see, the most wonderful thing about this Story is - it's your story too! (Jesus Storybook Bible, Sally Lloyd-Jones, Zondervan, 2007)

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