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From Rock to Cornerstone

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Have you ever visited a place that made you pause, that made you feel the weight of history, and the presence of something larger than yourself? There was one day this past fall when I found myself standing at two places marked by stone—each demanding remembrance, each shaping how we live forward, I could feel the weight of history and human cost pressed in on me twice over. Two places of stone became places of encounter—calling me to stop, to remember, and to bear witness.

This past September I travelled with Mark to Ottawa for the Canadian Fallen Firefighter's Memorial. It is a moving place, set among carefully arranged stone and open space, where the names of firefighters from across the country are etched permanently into polished surfaces. The memorial is quiet and deliberate in its design—inviting you to slow down, to walk, to read, and to linger. Each name marks a life gone too soon, men and women who dedicated themselves to the service of others and knowingly stepped into danger so that others might step back into safety. As I traced the names, I recognized some I had known personally, and I felt the weight of the reality that, in the years ahead, more familiar names will likely be added—

individuals who gave their lives for others, leaving behind families, communities, and a legacy that deserves to be remembered.

Then we walked across the street...to the National Holocaust Monument. The monument's architecture forms an elongated Star of David, which can be seen clearly from above, with large stones. This shape is meant to evoke both the Jewish symbol and the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust. It consists of six soaring triangular concrete segments that create the star's points. These tilted, angular walls create a powerful, contemplative space as visitors move through them. Inside and around the structure are large-scale photographic murals depicting Holocaust sites and landscapes, designed to connect visitors to the reality of what happened and to memory itself. The space is intended as a place of remembrance, reflection, and education, honoring the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and millions of other people targeted by Nazi persecution. It also acknowledges the journey of Holocaust survivors who later made Canada their home, and the need for continued vigilance against hatred, antisemitism, and intolerance. Visitors descend through the memorial into a central gathering space that fosters quiet contemplation, then ascend to a terrace with views of the city and Parliament, symbolizing memory looking toward the future. The

memorial is not only architectural but educational, with interpretive panels designed to deepen understanding of the Holocaust's history and lessons for today. I remember as I was walking throughout the monument, reading the stories on the stones, the horrors, visually seeing the depictions I was moved in that place. It was a physical place that invited people to remember past encounters of tragedy and the importance of memory, the good and the bad, for future generations.

These places taught me something Scripture has always known: God meets us, God asks us to remember, and God sends us to bear witness.

We have reached week 3 in our journey of stones throughout Scripture. The first week we looked at God as our rock, our foundation. The second week was stones of glory. We saw how God's glory was revealed in the beauty of Eden and in the precious stones that later adorned the high priest's garments—stones that marked His presence and called His people to dwell with Him, and that we are to continue to dwell with Him. Today, we look at two specific moments in the lives of Jacob and the Israelites where ordinary stones became extraordinary markers of God's presence; stones of encounter and remembrance. We will follow two stories, the one from Genesis 28:10-22, which we read this morning and then into Joshua 4:1-9.

There is a lot in the Genesis story we read this morning and

while some day we will unpack Jacob's dream, a significant part of this passage, this morning I want to focus on what happened to bookend Jacob's dream, what happened at the very beginning and then at the end. As Jacob reached this place at night, he put a stone under his head and laid down to sleep. A stone is not something I would think of using for a pillow. I've used many other things in a pinch for a pillow, clothes bunched up, towels or blankets, a stuffed animal, but never a stone. After Jacob awoke from his dream he says, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." He took the stone, that had been under his head and set it up as a pillar, pouring oil on top of it, saying "this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house."

God often meets us long before we have our lives "figured out." At this point in the narrative, Jacob is still a "work in progress" with a reputation for trickery, yet God reaches down to him in grace. The stone pillar stands as a marker of divine encounter, showing that God's presence renders space holy.

Centuries later, the nation of Israel stands at the entrance of the Promised Land, facing the barrier of the Jordan River. In a deliverance mirroring the Red Sea, God dams the waters, allowing the people to cross on dry land. Let us hear what is says in Joshua 4:1-9

Joshua 4:1–9 NRSV

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 forever.” 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.)

To memorialize this event, Joshua commands twelve men—one from each tribe—to take twelve stones from the middle of the riverbed where the priests stood. These stones were set up at Gilgal, which itself means a "circle of stones," to serve as a perpetual memorial. Joshua also set up a second heap of twelve stones in the middle of the river channel itself. The primary goal was to provoke a question from future generations: "What mean these stones?" The stones were not mere decoration; they were narrative tools designed to ensure the story of God's faithfulness was passed down.

There is an old legend that "Benevolence" and "Gratitude" rarely meet on earth. These memorial altars were meant to bring them together, acting as an altar of thanksgiving that pointed back to God's providence throughout the forty-year journey.

Just as the stones from the Jordan gave Israel fresh courage for the battles ahead, we are called to remember that "our extremity is God's opportunity." History bears witness to these moments. In the darkest days of the Holocaust, figures like Corrie ten Boom encountered God's sustaining presence in a concentration camp and emerged with a testimony of forgiveness that defied human logic. Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazi regime knowing it would cost him his life, trusting that faithfulness mattered even when deliverance did not come. And across Denmark,

ordinary citizens became agents of courage, risking everything to carry their neighbors to safety. These were not moments of comfort, but of encounter—where remembrance gave rise to courage, and faith shaped the future.

We must be careful not to rely on the "spiritual capital of the past." In later history, Bethel—the "House of God"—became a center for idolatry under Jeroboam. A place can be holy because of a past encounter, but if God's presence is ignored in the present, the stones become no more significant than any other rock.

In the New Testament, Jesus references Jacob's dream, telling Nathanael that he would see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is the ultimate nexus between God and humankind; He is the "gateway to heaven" and the true "House of God." Jesus doesn't just interpret the stones—He fulfills them.

Encounter without remembrance can fade, and remembrance without encounter becomes empty ritual. As you move forward this week, I encourage you to: Be attentive to "Bethel moments": God may meet you in the ordinary or difficult "wilderness" moments of your life. Pay attention; He is there.

Just as the Firefighter's Memorial was an invitations to a

quiet, personal "lingering" where you might trace the name of someone you knew, Jacob's stone at Bethel began as a private pillow of rest; an individual encounter with the Divine. However, both this memorial and the pillar at Bethel were intended to become something more: markers of a legacy that must be shared. We cannot forget that we are part of that legacy, and we must share.

The power of the National Holocaust Monument lies in its ability to provoke "vigilance against hatred" through its architectural storytelling. This directly mirrors the purpose of the twelve stones at Gilgal, which were set up specifically so that when future generations asked, "What mean these stones?" the history of God's deliverance could be told. What mean your stones? What is the story of God's deliverance in your life? Has your story been told, does it continue to be told?

God will meet us in the "wilderness" of our own lives. God reveals Himself before we fully understand, and we need to respond by remembering, just like Jacob. Remembering not only our own lives, but of those around us, as we work together for the Kingdom of God. And we—like the twelve men from the tribes of Israel—are called to carry the memories and faithfulness of God out of the "riverbed" and into the sight of the community to ensure those stories do not wash away.

Find physical or practical ways to journal or share your

stories of God's work. These are your "stones" of remembrance. Carry the memory for others: Just as the twelve stones told a story to the children of Israel, your testimony of God's faithfulness is a gift meant to be passed on to future generations. The stones in Jacob's story and Joshua's story show us a pattern: God meets His people, and then He calls them to remember and testify.

But there is a warning in amongst all of this. Bethel, once the "House of God," eventually became a "house of idols" when the people relied only on the spiritual capital of the past rather than a present relationship with God. It's like if we walk past the names of the fallen or the depictions of the Holocaust without being moved to reflection or action, the stones become "no more theologically significant than the rocks of Nebraska." We can remember correctly—and still live wrongly. True remembrance must lead to transformation; otherwise, we are just looking at "broken and charred pieces of pottery" from a dead history.

Last week Mom and I drove to the city for an appointment on Friday. We drove over the MacKay bridge in Halifax, where I saw the signs for the Africville National Historic Site. It reminded me of my final project for one of my fall courses that I took with Rev. Dr. Lennett Anderson called Theology and Practice of Racial Justice. Our final project was a Truth and Repair Commission Simulation, a project designed to critically examine a real-world case of racial

injustice in Christian life, ministry, and thought. Our group chose Africville, and while I don't have time to read you all of my paper here is a brief excerpt from the stories of Afriville and how it relates to today:

After the Revolutionary War and the Wars of 1812 many blacks came to call Nova Scotia home. It was these refugees that founded Africville, purchasing property along the Bedford Basin. The governmental powers decided, as Halifax grew, years later, that they wanted this land where Africville was situated. Industries and businesses started to intrude. The building of the railway resulted in the demolition of homes, with the railway being built through their community. Eventually, a city prison, "oil plant storage facility, a bone mill, a cotton factory, two slaughterhouses, a tar factory, coal handling facility, and a foundry" were built nearby. The infectious disease and trachoma hospitals were built close by, with the waste leading into the Africville soil, along with a city dump. When Africville residents, who were paying taxes in Halifax, wanted to improve their homes, they were often refused building permits, collection for sewage and garbage was often denied, along with requests for water lines, and electricity, despite this being offered to the rest of Halifax. As Joe Skinner, a resident of Africville states, "I think we should have a chance to redevelop our own property as well as anybody else. When you are in this country and you

own a piece of property, you're not a second-class citizen. That's why my people own this land, they worked for it, they toiled for it." Due to these, and many other horrific decisions by the government, Africville was deemed a slum and thus justified to be demolished. The residents of Africville, given the informal process of "handing down properties and housing within families...many residents were unable to prove legal title to their land and had little recourse when faced with the choice to sell or be evicted." Africville was demolished and residents were sent into housing projects on the outskirts of the city, similar to the placement of Black Loyalists outside major settlements in the late 1700's.

Sadly, the injustice did not end with Africville. We continue to hear echoes of these same struggles in the experiences of Preston today. An elder from East Preston states, "I fear that we lose our community - land is all the community has ever had. I feel as though the government will ambush their way into taking over our community land and historical culture." Racism and oppression—often exercised through control and removal of land—still shapes the daily lives and futures of marginalized communities in our province. In Canada February is Black History Month. And while racism and oppression is brought to the forefront for Black Communities during this month we are called to never forget. To never forget the fear that many

communities and individuals have endured throughout history and continue to endure today. As I said earlier, true remembrance must lead to transformation; otherwise, we are just looking at "broken and charred pieces of pottery" from a dead history.

We have a God who sides with the oppressed. As Jesus says, Luke 4:18–19 ““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”” As it’s written in Isaiah 58:6–7 “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” God calls us to be a voice for those who do not have one in this world, or whose is silenced.

So I challenge you this week and moving forward, hear the stories of those around you and beyond, those often shut out from society. To live your life marked by "stones" of prayer, service, remembrance, and testimony—that they provoke others to ask about the source of your hope and your history. That you ask yourself, how can I live as a remembrance living stone of all that God has done,

continues to do, and will do, working towards justice and love for all.

Next week, we will see how these memories of faithfulness lead us into a deeper relationship as we explore the Stones of Covenant. May we always be ready to answer when the world asks, "What mean these stones?" by saying, "The Lord has done great things for me...for us." Amen.