

## **A DEEPER LOOK 3**

### **“AT MARKING MILESTONES”**

*“Samuel then took a large stone and placed it between the towns of Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer (which means ‘the stone of help’), for he said, ‘Up to this point the Lord has helped us!’” 1 Samuel 7:12*

Our younger son Jordan emailed me a few days ago and made an unusual request (no, not the one to co-sign on a \$25,000 loan); he wanted a hymnal. He mentioned that he remembered me telling him about a practice I have used periodically through my Christian life. At times when my personal devotional life grows dry, I turn to the hymnal to read, study, sing and pray some of my favorite hymns. He thought that sounded like an interesting way for a budding musician to engage his spirit.

Thursday morning in preparation for this message I came across our text verse, and it explained something I had never known before. For years I’ve enjoyed singing the hymn; “Come, thou fount of every blessing”, but hesitated asking people to sing words that they didn’t understand. (At least I never understood). “Here I raise my Ebenezer” is a reference to Samuel erecting a monument to mark a milestone in Israel’s history. Following another long period of waywardness and idolatry; Samuel is elected and anointed to lead them back to God. Along the way they encounter the ever-present and forever dreaded enemy; the Philistines. As they follow Samuel (who is following God) they see God’s hand deliver them safely from this enemy, and Samuel marks the spot with an Ebenezer stone.

This morning we are marking a milestone in our history, we are celebrating 50 years of faithful ministry in this building that has born fruit of our labors and God’s faithfulness to us! We don’t often plant huge stones in the ground, but we do place cornerstones to help us remember... Today we have on our altar the original cornerstone from the original building in downtown Bismarck.

Following it's dislodgement in a few minutes, we'll place the cornerstone from this building alongside the original...and we'll remember...at least 39 or so of you will remember. And that leads me to the point of this message. It's found in the last phrase of our text: *"Up to this point, the Lord has helped us!"* Foolish would we be not to begin our thoughts by remembering...we are where we are, we have what we have, we celebrate this historic day...because up to this point, the Lord has helped us!

I'll direct you now to another Marking Milestones story from our Old Testament, and in doing so will try to lay before us what Marking Milestones allow or afford us the opportunity to do.

It happened in the early and exciting days of Israel's history. Following centuries of imprisonment in Egypt, the dramatic rescue of Moses at the Red Sea, the giving of the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai, and 40 years of wilderness wandering...finally...finally the nation stands poised to re-enter their beloved homeland. That probably meant more to them than we can understand, but we get it a bit. At the edge of the harvest season swollen Jordan River, Joshua (Moses successor); readies the people for this dramatic day. He instructs them what God has instructed him that the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant would first approach the river, then dip their toes in the water, and...wait. A whole other sermon might be necessary to explore just this toe wetting act of faith. Isn't it true that often God acts in response to our first initial steps of faith? Sometimes we won't see God work, till we first get our feet wet. God never reveals our vision, until God is convinced we are committed to do it!

As the priests feet get wet, the Jordan River will begin to back up, and stand like a wall (reminiscent of what? Yes, the Red Sea) to allow them safe passage across. Joshua tells each tribe to elect a strong backed representative to grab a large stone from the river bottom on their way across that will be used to build a memorial, a milestone on the homeward side of the Jordan River. Now Joshua gives them two other specific instructions, and this is what I want us to see this morning:

## **1. OUR MILESTONES AFFORD US THE OPPORTUNITY TO LOOK BACK AND TO LOOK FORWARD**

*“We will use these stones to build a memorial. In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ Then you can tell them, ‘They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant went across.’ These stones will stand as a memorial among the people of Israel forever.”* Joshua 4: 6-7

I know the significance of most celebrations like this is wrapped up in looking back, remembering, reminiscing, recalling experiences and people, from our past...and that is good. But as Joshua reminded Israel, I’ll remind us...these days are not just about our past...they are about our future! When this cornerstone was placed some 50 years ago, or that one was placed almost 100 years ago, do you think your forefathers and mothers spent all their time that day thinking about all they were leaving, and all they were losing? No, they likely spent time imagining this day, when their grandsons and daughters (some by birth, some by faith) would smile and sing about the Church’s one foundation. I visited with you just a couple weeks ago about our great and ongoing task of continually converting and reconverting our historic birthright into an on going and God-honoring legacy. That was Joshua’s challenge as well.

It was for their children, and theirs; that these stones were erected. We mark milestones so that we never forget our past...”Up to this point, the Lord has helped us.”

We mark our milestones so that we never forget our future is dependent upon... God! And that naturally leads to the final instruction Joshua gave the people, and this one is a bit strange:

## **2. OUR MILESTONES AFFORD US THE OPPORTUNITY TO LOOK WITHIN**

*“Joshua also set up another pile of twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, at the place where the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant were standing. And they are there to this day.” Joshua 4:9*

Most of us would agree that we understand (at least partially) the marking milestone memorial on the bank of the Jordan that will serve for all time as a reminder of the place where God stopped the river, the place we crossed on dry ground, the place we came home to worship again in God’s Promised Land. But what are we to make of this rock pile in the middle of the river?

I’m not sure but I think it has to do with our hearts! The Memorial on the bank was for the people, but the altar in the river was for God. From that day till this, God alone has been privy to its display. From that day in Eden to this...God alone has been privy to the inner places of our hearts, minds and souls. Marking milestones is about looking back. Marking milestones is about looking forward. But marking milestones is ultimately a matter of the heart.

Do we recall our past with fondness and appreciation, or do we look back with remorse and regret; that’s a heart question? Do we consider our future with fear and apprehension, or do we press forward with faith in the middle of uncertainty; that’s a heart question? I think the altar in the river was an act of worshipful obedience that Joshua made the nation watch, just to remind them that it is all about God, they were all about God, we are all about God...”Up to this point, the Lord has helped us!”

Milestones in Judea or cornerstones in concrete are not just about rocks, or bricks, nor just about buildings or tabernacles. Marking milestones has to do with the past, the future, and our heart. I believe that God's message to God's people at the point of any milestone event is this: What about your heart? Is it right with God? Is your heart in the right place, are you dying in the past, or dreading in the future? Are you pining for days gone or pensive about days to come? What is the condition of your heart? Does it belong to God, or is it tied to the past? Does it belong to God or is it lost dreaming or dreading the future? God wants our hearts, to be right; right with God, right with each other, right with the world.

You all know the story of the great artist Michelangelo and his famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. What you may not know was that he was commissioned for this great work by the reigning Pope of that day, who was apparently a quite impatient man. He often interrupted Michelangelo to check on his progress, which I for one married to an artist have learned...is stupid! One day upon a surprise visit to the chapel the Pope found the artist laboriously painting the backside corner of an unexposed beam on the very top of the ceiling. A canvas that the Pope righteously reminded the slow artisan; the world will never see. To which Michelangelo rejoined: "It matters not to me whether the world or anyone else will see what I have painted, because I know that God will see what I have done, and for that I must paint my best!" "To that end leave me now!"

The world has never seen the stone altar at the bottom of the Jordan River...but God sees what Joshua has done. For the first time in 50 years we will shortly (have seen) see what only God has seen since. For eternity past, until eternity future, only God sees in our heart, and only God knows if we have done, or are doing, or will do, our best painting. To that end leave us now, because up to this point, the Lord has helped us! AMEN

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