

**Building up the Household of God:
Rocks and Remembering
Joshua 24:1-15, 24-28
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October 14, 2018
Northminster Presbyterian Church**

The Shepard Family has a real understanding of the importance of Place. You may have read this week about the family of Matthew Shepard, who was beaten to death and left to die tied to a fence 20 years ago this month in Wyoming. They have been searching for 20 years to find a place for his ashes to rest. It seems that for many of the years after his death on October 12th, 1998, they received threats that anywhere they buried his ashes, there would be protests, violence and desecration.

Just a couple of weeks ago it was announced that Shepard's remains will now be interred in a service later this month in the crypt of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. First planned in 1893 and not completed until 1990, the National Cathedral has been the place where so many times the nation has gathered to look back and remember, to look back and to honor, to look back and to grieve. It's where the D.C. Memorial Service for Senator John McCain was held earlier this fall.

Matthew Shepard will join President Woodrow Wilson, writer and activist Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, and President Wilson's first grandchild, the Rev. Francis Bowes Sayre, Jr., all of whom are buried in the Cathedral.

Reverend Sayre was the Dean of the Cathedral from 1951 to 1978, a tumultuous time in Washington. He famously marched with Dr. King in March of 1965 from Selma to Montgomery in support of voting rights. Rev. Sayre was also famous for chastising Congress for falling under the sway of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee. Sayre's outspokenness is one of the things that put the National Cathedral on the map, so to speak. It towers over the District of Columbia and is also an Episcopal Parish Church. So, it's a place of both national and local importance. It is a place from which Americans can look back, specifically south and east over Washington, and see all the stone edifices of our history there — the monuments, the Capitol Building, the White House, the Supreme Court. But it's also a place where one can look back across our national history, both its moments of great hope and its moments of great shame.

Last year, the Cathedral removed a stain-glass window honoring generals of the Confederacy. This was after years of debate over the apparent celebration of those who fought to defend, among another things, slavery. It was yet another reminder that, like Joshua's people, we live off vineyards we did not plant with national wealth that was created by labor we had no right to use. The current Dean of the Cathedral noted this week that she believes providing a safe place for Matthew Shepard's ashes will be a step in the process of the greater Christian church making amends for the sometimes, born-of-faith hatred that killed Shepard and so many others over the years.

When Joshua gathered the Israelites together at Shechem, it was not dissimilar to gathering them at the National Cathedral of the Promised Land. Way back in Genesis 12, when Abram was following God's call and stopped in Shechem to receive God's promise of the land, Shechem was the first place the Bible records the Lord "appearing to Abram and Sarai." But

Abram didn't actually take the land in Genesis 12; he traveled further south. But first, nearby, he built an altar, presumably of stones. And then in Genesis 33, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, came to Shechem, now a city, and actually bought a tract of land and settled there. And he built an altar, presumably of stones. In Genesis 37, Shechem was the place where Joseph goes to find his brothers before he is sold into slavery. Earlier in the book of Joshua, Shechem was set aside as one of the Cities of Refuge where those facing death penalties in other parts of the land of Israel could flee and not be put to death.

Now, Joshua calls the people together here, a place rich with their history. They are still an exilic people. And, understandably, after a dozen or so generations in Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the desert, there are lots of other people who are now living in the land, and they don't want to give it up. That's much of what the Book of Joshua is about, the people taking back their ancestral land, sometimes easily, sometimes with great struggle. But, along the way, they have had many encounters with the peoples of this land and the many different religious traditions they practice.

The people have picked up a few extra gods along the way, a few extra idols, a few things they are worshipping alongside Yahweh, and Joshua doesn't think that's the best thing for them and for their future. So, he calls them together at Shechem. And now the people have gathered from a few miles to a few hundred miles away, essentially to great-great-great-great-great-great-great (and on and on) grandad's farm. And Joshua thinks it's time they remember — remember all that God has done — and recommit and renew the covenant that God made with Abram and Sarai, with Jacob and his four wives. It's a covenant where God makes promises and they promise to be faithful to Yahweh; a covenant renewed on Sinai as the people were called into obedience to the freedom God called them to in our passage last week.

But let's take a moment to be honest about our reaction to this remembering. This passage recounts with great glee God's role in the violent overthrow of many peoples, the destruction of cities and civilizations in the 13th Century BC. Most scholars agree however that it was actually composed in the 6th Century BC during or just after the Babylonian Exile, when the writing team, known as the Deuteronomistic Historians, composed several books of ancient history greatly influenced by their own context.

The book of Judges, which follows, makes it clear that this can't be read as a purely historical account. Many of the very enemies of the people in the land of Canaan mentioned in this passage will show up again to fight the Israelites just one book later. So, I think it's a fair statement to say that the writers of Joshua have something else in mind other than a straight factual account. Perhaps they wanted the people to remember all the times before when they have drawn on Yahweh's past promises, drawn on the events they experienced as deliverance.

And as for those idols, I wonder what it felt like to be there, to know that back home, sitting in your tent, was that pretty fertility statue you bought because, gosh, it's been four years with no children and it couldn't hurt right? To realize that the song you now sing while you are hoeing is a catchy tune you picked up from the neighbors, but it's a song to the god Baal for a good harvest. Surely, they must have felt a bit guilty. They hadn't intended to stray from Yahweh. It had all seemed so innocent. Were they really serving another god? Were they just lazy, or trying to be accepted in the neighborhood, or just hedging their bets? I wonder, might we know how they felt if we stop and think about it?

Who might the gods be that we've picked up along the way, to be popular or to get ahead, or just to hedge our bets? I'm talking about the gods you've heard me talk about a lot this year already, like safety and money and political party and intellect, and education, — even science if we worship it, instead of using it as the tool it is, and instead of recognizing its human limitations, as we've been learning in our Thursday evening conversations on race in America. But even more, for some religious folks, theology and doctrine have become idols if they think they have God all figured out. An idol could even be the church, if we worship the building and the windows and the plaques and the status of this building or the name Presbyterian. But those aren't things to be worshipped; they are tools for God's worship, assets of the Gospel — we hope.

Joshua doesn't say he's building another altar. He's just putting a rock in the middle of the people saying, "Use this rock to remember and stay true to the God who has stayed true to you." Look around the room. What are our rocks? The font, table, cross, scripture? Joshua didn't want the people to worship the rock but to use it to remember. We do the same, remember the love that was offered to us there in the promises the church made to us, and the welcome we received from God here even before we knew it.

Table: Remember the meal where Jesus ate with friend and betrayer and where we will eat at the banquet it calls us to remember even, if for us, it hasn't happened yet.

Scripture: Remember the second Yeshua, the one we call Jesus Christ, who is lifted up here. We remember the people who have triumphed and failed, the people God never abandoned. We remember the radical hospitality and countercultural ministry of Jesus that changed the world and changes us even now.

Cross: Remember the sacrifice — that God came among us. And in our human fear and our worshiping the gods we had created inside and outside of the church, we killed him rather than see the truth. But our death-dealing ways did not have the final say.

All of these are our rocks of remembrance. And in this season we are about to enter, when we are thinking about and preparing for the future of Northminster and its ministries for 2019 — for these next five weeks as we consider the goals we will set for ourselves and our resources — I invite each of us, every time we enter these doors, every time we see these stones placed in our midst to remember, to give thanks, and to take stock — yes, letting go of the other gods we've given our time and trust and resources to. But most importantly, let us remember all that God has already done here at the corner of Harrison and Central Park, remember the lives that have been transformed, and remember the ministries of care, concern, justice and peacemaking that have flourished for almost a century in this neighborhood. And so, let us reclaim the promises of the one who brings us here, who loves us through our inadequacies and gives us new life and new hope with each dawning. Let our remembering inspire us to turn and see the light the Spirit is shining for us, for each next step we will take — those we will take next year and those beyond — as we make this household a place of welcome and safety, just as the National Cathedral has become for the memory of Matthew Shepard; and as we together decide that as for us and this household, we will continue to serve the Lord, now and always. Amen.