

Title: The stones bear witness

Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a; 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; John 6:56-69

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Learning from our Jewish ancestors and neighbours, I have become a collector of stones.

- I picked up a stone at the creek of the Jukskei River that flowed along the boundary of my garden when my childhood house was sold, somehow this stone, this piece of earth holds my memories of that place.
- I picked up a stone along the East Coast of South Africa before I left to fly to Vancouver for the first time in December 2000. This stone is worn down by the rough and tumble of the Indian Ocean. A place whose sounds and rhythms taught me to slow down and be in the moment.
- I picked up a stone on Spanish Banks, a year after my husband died, a stone that reminds me that life is stronger than death.
- I picked up a stone on Bowen Island while staying at Rivendell, as I was working through the stories “I tell myself of my life” and I decided to reclaim a new narrative. This stone is a symbol of hope for me.

We read today in the Old Testament book of Joshua, of a choice the Israelites were making. A choice to keep trusting God.

And at the end of this conversation between Joshua and the people, Joshua picks up a stone:

The verses following this conversation that Joshua had with the people read like this:

“On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. 26 And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord.

27 “See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”

Stones became for them ‘ebenezers’ that great Hebrew word for a ‘cairn’ (a memorial pile of stones),

The earth bearing witness to our actions and choices.

The earth bears witness to the story of human life.

It tells of the healthy choices we make,
and it tells us of the destructive values of consumerism and injustice that have taken hold.

And somehow, the earth also bears witness to the faithfulness of God, the mystery that holds and sustains us. I am always amazed that the earth is still turning on its axis, that the moon and tides are still in rhythm, in spite of human chaos.

What will the story be for the generations to come? What story will the earth bear of our lives?

Living a life that follows the way of Jesus the Christ is a dangerous path. It is a path of constant challenge. Constantly inviting us to deeper things to more. And the way is to linger with the uncomfortable, to stay with our questioning, “to pursue our doubts to the dust”

The words of Sister Joan Chittister and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams offer us a pause for thought. They warn against an ‘unquestioning institutional faith’ – one that has not been personalized in the fires of life.

“To suppress doubt, then, to discourage thinking, to try to stop a person from questioning the unquestionable is simply to make them more and more susceptible to the cynical, more accepting of naive belief. It is doubt that is the beginning of real faith.”

We witness today an account of Jesus’ followers. Some of whom were finding his teaching too difficult.

These teachings took place in a Synagogue, where the religious leaders of the time were threatened by the liberating words of Jesus. Some of Jesus followers also could not swallow all of what he was saying.

Just what about this teaching was so hard to chew?

“Jesus is announcing the indwelling of God for all of humanity”

Theologian Tripp Fuller writes:

“Through the union of both humanity and divinity in the one human Jesus, he becomes both the pattern and the cause of a new form of reconciled human life - a human life that participates by grace in the divine life.”

This is gritty teaching. And it moves the emphasis toward all of life.

The religious life is so easy to compartmentalise, keeping it all separated out...

- There is work, and there is recreation time, and there is family life
- And there is church life and then there is our political life.

But if the substance of God dwells in humanity, (eat ‘me’ Jesus the Christ says)
Then these separations cannot hold.

This is an invitation to union with God.

The implications are vast

- We no longer get to project all our hopes, our anger, our pain, our blame onto a distant God.

No, God in us, means that we embody the hope, we need to deal with our anger, we need to process our pain, we need to take responsibility.

As Richard Rohr says: God comes disguised as our life and our death – all the little deaths, the losses, the things that are hard. As we work these through, as we face our responsibilities in this life – we encounter God. God in us the hope of Glory.

As Archbishop Tutu says: “without God we cannot, without us, God will not”.

This also has tremendous implications for how we are the church together.

- Religion often becomes more about doing what is right – a morality.
The invitation to union with God is primarily a mystical experience and out of this we discern right action. The emphasis is different.
There is no code of action. There is an ongoing relational conversation as we navigate each moment in the present.
- We can also no longer practice a faith that says that some are in and others aren't.
If God indwells humanity, then everyone has access.
And friends it also levels the false layering of clergy and laity.
We are all indwelt. We may have different roles but the responsibility to manifest God on earth lies with us all.

In 2016 I stood on Robbin Island. And I picked up a stone. A stone to remind me of the responsibility I have, born into white privilege.

And recently I found this poem by Wayne Visser, a tribute to Robbin Island:

If these stones could whisper, what memories would haunt them still?
Would it be of humans in cages, accused of heinous crime
Or justice vigilantes condemned to blinding quarries of lime?
How painful the sight of jailors with minds under lock and key?
How hopeful the salve of forgiveness, the long walk to make them free?

If these stones could whisper, what triumph would they exclaim?
Would it be of a brand new dawn, when the island became a bridge
A sanctuary, a learning place, for the world an inspiring image?
The stones echo with silence, mute with wisdom that time beget
But if these stones could whisper, they'd say: always forgive, never forget

if you were to build a Cairn today. To pick up stones, one by one.

With each stone a testament to the faithful and challenging work of God in you and through you.

“What would the stones say?”