

Heritage Hopes  
Psalm 100; Joshua 3:14-17; 4:4-7; Matthew 5.1-14  
Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford  
A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
Heritage Sunday  
June 13, 2010

The passages of scripture before us this Lord's Day – this day on which we mark our heritage -- are fitting: the beatitudes, the pillar-like teachings of our faith, read by Mari; the ancient Psalm proclaiming God's faithfulness across the generations read by Greg .

And then we hear the words from the Book of Joshua, recounting the beginnings of God's people – as a congregation -- in the promised land. Joshua issues a call to remembrance, to the foundations of our faith . . .

There is a wonderful story told about the groundbreaking here at the Larchmont Avenue Church, and our foundations . . .

First, you must know that Emily Lindsley, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, was the organizer of a gathering of the 51 souls who became the very first members of the Larchmont Avenue Church on June 28, 1914. At our beginnings people came to worship at a house down the street – at 39 Larchmont Avenue -- which was kind of a cottage, which isn't there now.

The number of people grew quickly. In April 1915, this very parcel of land became available – where we are now. For a sum of \$5000, the people of the Larchmont Avenue Presbyterian Church bought this property. Things were moving along and growing. There was a great sense of enthusiasm and vision for a church building and sanctuary. The plan to pay off the property cost \$5000 was in place: It went like this: \$500 was paid upon the contract signing. \$1600 after six months. The balance was to be paid by a mortgage at 6 per cent. And then came the building campaign: The building campaign was launched with all of \$863.30 cash in our treasury. \$863! Indeed, a statement of faith!

Well, in December of 1915, a building was completed; mind you, it was just the basement portion of this present building, with a plan to build a sanctuary on top of it. The level below us became the location of a congregation of 103 members – with a Sunday school of 50 children. The Sunday school was growing quickly; it became the largest in all of Westchester county. It grew fast and large. Meanwhile the congregation was meeting in the basement which is now the Carhart Room. They met for worship and then for Sunday school (I'm not sure of that sequence.). And since the Sunday school was growing so fast, the Church put the plans to build the sanctuary on hold. They instead proceeded to build the Parish House for the use of our Sunday School. The Parish House is where we now have Russell Hall and the church offices.

When it came time for the actual groundbreaking ceremony in June of 1924 – June is indeed a special time in the history of our church -- there at the groundbreaking, Emily

Lindsley, with everyone gathered around, pushed a shovel into the ground and hit a rock. She apparently did not miss a beat as she announced to everyone: “you see, our Church is founded on a rock.” We’re on solid ground, to be sure.

In the Book of Joshua, we see the account over three thousand years ago, of the Hebrew people crossing the river Jordan, marking their transition from wandering in the wilderness to entering the Promised Land. The passage reads:

*When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still...Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.*

Just as Jesus’ in the beatitudes is cast as new iteration of Moses’s with the commandments, Joshua reads like the new iteration of Moses’ crossing the Red Sea. With Joshua at the Jordan, the waters are parted. The people move to higher, dry ground.

*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...So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.*

People of faith know the meaning of memory. Those stones – these stones here, as the church – provided continuity in the midst of transition. Indeed, transition is about us! We are old. But we are new, and changing. Memory stores the wisdom of the past. Memory shapes the perceptions of the present, and sets the course for the future. So, remember . . .

[Memory these days appears so computer driven. The capacity of a minute silicon chip to store memory is truly amazing. Such capacities seem to defy the call to really remember – the technology is so remote-controlled or hand held, flooding our mind -- that we run the risk of losing what is taken to heart.]

Apple's ipod – which is really cool, but now is really old [make way for ipad!] -- Apple made its marketing claim with the memorable phrase: “Ipod, Ipad, therefore I am” . . . In so doing, they mimicked the Descartes slogan that launched the Age of Reason; it was Descartes who said: “I think, therefore I am.”

William Sloane Coffin took the phrase further, beyond Descartes as well. Not “I think, therefore I am.” But, I love, therefore I am. To care, to connect, to relate with compassion.

Meanwhile, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa (in these post-apartheid, World Cup days) . . . Desmond Tutu suggests an alternative “I am” phrase to characterize the meaning of humanity. Loosely translated from the Bantu language, his phrase means “I belong, therefore I am.” For Tutu, being fully human is to recognize our affinity with all other human beings. The traditions/teachings, the pillars of our faith affirm that all people are created in the image of God.” Remember: you are a child of God. Each of us are. Each one of us is.

It is notable here at the Larchmont Avenue Church, that the early plans for the church's building of the sanctuary – took a back seat to the building of space for a growing Sunday School. Such was the enthusiasm for the teaching and learning of faith, for the growth of all children of God . . . The actual brochure describing and enlisting support for the project calls for a construction of particular, specific materials. I quote: “The plans show a building of rough native stone with soft gray colorings.” And so it was – it just had to be -- that at the groundbreaking, just after the publication of that brochure, Emily Lindsley's shovel hit that rock . . . such is the foundation of the Church, on Christ our rock and our redeemer.

Joshua calls upon the leaders, the representatives from each of the tribes/ the families of the people, to teach the children what the stones mean – to instruct and share the meaning of faith.

Remember, that you are a child of God, belonging to God and the human family. As you love, you are. In Christ. Amen.