

“Celebrating God’s Blessings”

Joshua 1:16-17, 4:4-7, 24:15 & Jeremiah 31:12-13 & 21

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How do you celebrate God’s blessings? What symbols remind you of the times God blessed you? How do you regularly tell the stories of times you felt God’s love, peace and joy?

In my office is a rock cairn, a stack of rocks. It reminds me of numerous ways God has blessed me. It reminds me of times God spoke to me on backpacking trips, reminds me of the love of my family shared on the farm as we picked and stacked rock, reminds me that God is the way the truth and the life, reminds me of beautiful places shared with Leslie. Some of the rocks have words on them that remind me of special times, other rocks have been given to me as a gift reminding me of inspiring people. Other rocks have words on them such as joy, love, and peace. Often I take one of these rocks and balance it on top to remind me to pause and celebrate when I perceive that blessing. In times of stress, fear, and discord the rocks remind me that even the smallest act of love makes a difference, that there is joy even in bleak situations and that God’s steadfast everlasting love will sustain me with peace. In times of grief, disaster, and tragedy, the rocks mark the way back to love, joy, and peace by reminding me of God’s past blessings, reminding me of inspirational people and places, reminding me of practices that open my senses to perceive God. Throughout scripture, there are accounts of people building rock cairns to celebrate God’s blessings.

There are numerous symbols that can remind you of God’s blessings such as a journal, picture, music, a labyrinth, a file of affirming cards, a beautiful spot, jewelry, a bible, a yellow cabin, a tree, a particular familiar path, a certain food, a particular prayer. Each person has their own unique version of the rock cairn, their own special way of perceiving God. We all need symbols that remind us of times when we felt blessed by God, symbols that inspire us to tell others the story of that blessing and symbols that honor God.

Joshua had several symbols that reminded him of God’s blessings. Joshua had a symbol that reminded him of God’s loving presence, a symbol that reminded him of God’s promise to be with him and a symbol that reminded him of how God blessed Moses. These symbols inspired him to tell the stories of God blessing him and others. These symbols were a way Joshua honored and worshipped God.

Joshua was one of the twelve scouts of the Promise Land. They all agreed it was beautiful and fertile with an abundance of food and water, **but**, big but here, ten of the scouts were blind to God’s blessings. They saw only problems. They let their fears fuel the magnitude of these problems, so that their report was distorted and greatly exaggerated. They were afraid to enter the Promise Land, so they spread discouraging reports among the people saying there were giants in the land that would destroy us. We were like grasshoppers to them. These spiritually blind scouts said the land itself would swallow us.

Sometimes we still struggle like these ten scouts today. We live in a land of abundance, yet we are tempted to dwell on our problems and fears and blow them out of proportion instead of giving thanks and celebrating God’s presence, love, and blessings.

Two scouts Caleb and Joshua said it is indeed a wonderful land and God is with us, so let us go at once and live there. Instead the people were filled with doom and gloom. Paralyzed by fear they chose to do nothing, to wander in the desert for forty years. They forgot God was with them, failed to acknowledge God’s gifts, and did not enter the Promise Land.

For forty years Joshua used symbols to remind himself about God’s blessings. He used symbols to start conversations about God’s forgiveness and steadfast everlasting love. Joshua pointed out how and where God was working in people’s lives and helped them create their own symbols. Despite the pessimism of his colleagues, Joshua kept advocating to enter the Promise Land.

We are living in a time of noisy, false voices telling us to be afraid of everything and everyone. Candidates are telling us to be afraid, to hate certain people, to exclude people. Use your symbols to remind you of God’s blessings, so your conversations are accounts of love triumphing over obstacles, of times of joy,

and experiences of blessings. Everyday use your symbols of God's blessing to inspire you to love extravagant and celebrate blessings.

Joshua endured 40 years of pessimistic, fearful, hateful people by pointing out God's presence in the lives of these fearful people. After 40 years of seeing Joshua celebrate God's blessings, the people changed their attitude saying, **Joshua 1:16-17** "We will do whatever you command us, and we will go wherever you send us. We will obey you just as we obeyed Moses. And may the LORD your God be with you as God was with Moses."

Before entering the Promise Land, Joshua gathered the people around a symbol of God's blessings, the Ark of the Covenant. The ark symbolized God's presence, symbolized that they were blessed to be a blessing, symbolized that God loved them so they could love each other and everyone. The ark reminded them of the wonderful ways God loved them, cared for them, and provided for them during the exodus from Egypt.

As Joshua led the people across the Jordan River and into the Promise Land, he made a symbol celebrating God's blessings so generations to come would remember how God delivered them and continues to deliver people today.

Joshua 4:4-7 "Joshua called together the twelve men he had chosen—one from each of the tribes of Israel. He told them, "Go into the middle of the Jordan, in front of the Ark of the Lord your God. Each of you must pick up one stone and carry it out on your shoulder—twelve stones in all, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. 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."

In the twilight of his life Joshua gathered the people and showed them symbols and told them stories of God's love, care, and blessings. Joshua told the people they must each choose who they will serve God or fear. Joshua declared **Joshua 24:15** "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Joshua then made another symbol by rolling a huge stone underneath the oak tree beside the tabernacle of the Lord.

All of us go through dark times in our life; sometimes as individuals, sometimes as families, and sometimes as a community. We don't know why disasters and sickness happen. God is with us, weeping with us. God is working with us, in us, and through us to bring the glory of heaven to earth today. If we are not healed on earth, we will enjoy the splendor of heaven for eternity. God's love, joy, and peace will prevail. Ultimately God will perfect all of creation and every person. All of us will be welcomed home to God's loving, joyful family. Symbols guide us through the dark times.

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet. Jeremiah's personal life was a mess. He was beaten numerous times, hated, poor, imprisoned, sick, and thrown into a well. He saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of his country. Some of his friends were beaten, others died as slaves. They were all abused and oppressed. In a dream Jeremiah heard God say, **Jeremiah 31:21a (CEV)** "With rock piles and signposts, mark the way home..." Jeremiah had symbols that reminded him of God's blessings, inspired him to talk about God's blessings, and honored God.

In that dark time of fear, hate, tragedy, destruction, sickness, and death, the symbols pointed them to the light of God. In times abundant with God's blessings, we are encouraged **Jeremiah 31:21 (CEV)** "With rock piles and signposts, mark the way home, my dear people. It is the same road by which you left."

When we feel dry, hollow, and lifeless, symbols will help us find our way back to life. One of my symbols is that rock cairn. It could be singing a familiar song, reading a journal, walking a labyrinth, doing the laundry, caring for a garden, traveling a particular path, attending worship, looking at a picture, going to a particular place, knitting, fishing, golfing, a hobby, or a sport. Whatever it is for you that you do to celebrate God's blessings, that reminds you of God's steadfast, everlasting love and transforming, resurrecting grace. Whatever it is for you that gives you the strength to tell another of that time when you felt loved, whole, joyful, at peace, belonging, that somehow you sensed that in time everything will be glorious.

At first, these symbols may seem small compared to our pain; yet, little by little they will help us open ourselves to God's blessings enabling us to find our way home to abundant life.

In Jeremiah's dream he perceived God saying, **Jeremiah 31:12-13 (CEV)** "My people will come to Mount Zion and celebrate; their faces will glow because of my blessings. I will give them grain, grapes, and olive oil, as well as sheep and cattle. Israel will be prosperous and grow like a garden with plenty of

water. Young women and young men, together with the elderly, will celebrate and dance, because I will comfort them and turn their sorrow into happiness.” How will these people find their way to this glorious life? Jeremiah said, **Jeremiah 31:21 (CEV) “With rock piles and signposts, mark the way home, my dear people. It is the same road by which you left.”**

In the church office I have surrounded myself with symbols that remind me of God’s blessings; so when I am trying to figure out what God wants me to say in a sermon or what God wants me to pray when someone comes in for a visit, I am reminded and inspired by God’s blessings. There is a picture of a hike on Mount Rainer; a picture book of my RAGBRAI bike ride with wonderful friends; pictures of my family; a banner my mom made for my ordination; several symbols of workcamps; a picture of a campsite by a lake towards the summit of Galatian Mountain which depicts the spot where I visualize being with Jesus, this is often how I start my personal prayers; a toy tractor takes me back to farming with my father; a red metal bicycle given to me by a biking buddy; a ship in a bottle that Leslie gave me when we were married; pieces of art given to me by my sisters; a piece of art given to me at my ordination by college friends; three pictures that tell of love transforming lives through Remember Niger; a picture of a tree given by a friend; a piece of art given to me by a colleague; a framed statement of my five theological rocks that are the five things that I believe are foundational to ministry; pictures from seminary; a drawing from Abigail; a picture collage of our hike in Glacier National Park from Spencer; two pictures, one of a sunrise the other a sunset in Hudson, Wisconsin given by the session in gratitude for my service as a ruling elder; a file drawer full of cards given to me over the years; a picture of the boundary waters; a journal and much more; and of course, my rock cairn. Each symbol reminds me of a particular way God blessed me. Each symbol has a story of God’s blessings that I tell often times to myself when I need a lift to perceive God.

Joshua used symbols to give him 40 years of perseverance among fearful people to courageously led them into the Promise Land. Jeremiah used symbols to keep his soul in tune with God throughout his earthly life of poverty, disaster, sickness, and weeping. Each of us is a living symbol. There is tremendous, illuminating power in your faith story, your questions, your hopes, and dreams. This mighty power is unlocked when you share your story with another and when you listen to someone else’s story.

What symbols do you use to celebrate God’s blessings? What symbols help you find your way home?

Amen