

“Milestones”

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⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God ... ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

¹⁴When 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. ¹⁵Now 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, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While 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.

4 When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ²“Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’” ⁴Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵Joshua 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, ⁶so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ ⁷then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.” (Joshua 3:9 - 4:7)

Two blocks east of here, an old reddish stone marker sits just off the side of the Boston Post Road. It was originally installed in 1804 as a guide to travelers on the new Westchester Turnpike, an early toll road that followed a Siwanoy foot path up the sound shore. The stone, which bears the simple engraved message “21 miles from N. York,” was moved to its current location in 1941, so that more people could see this significant artifact of Larchmont’s history. The stone was crafted for a practical purpose, but now it stands as a reminder of a significant moment in time, a memorial of how a community came to be.

That is the kind of remembrance Joshua wanted to establish when he instructed each of the twelve men who had carried the ark into the Jordan River to take a large stone from the dry riverbed, carry it to the point where Israel had first entered the Promised Land, and pile them together into a monument. “This will be a sign among you,” Joshua said, “so that in times to come, when your children ask what this stack of stones is all about, you can tell them the amazing story of how God led us, sustained us, and blessed us with this place.” The place was given the name “Gilgal,” which in Hebrew means “circle of stones.” “By this



you shall know," Joshua said, "that the living God among you... So these stones shall be ... a memorial forever."

In other words, it was a milestone. Yes, it was a marker along the road, but in the comings and goings of the nation of Israel it would become a cherished commemorative symbol for a people and a faith – a reminder of where they had been, where they hoped to go, and who they were meant to be.

The same can be said of the pile of rocks in which we sit at this very moment. The first stones were stacked here in 1915 -- a simple structure over a large basement room, all constructed for less than \$6,000. Fourteen years later, in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash and the beginnings of the Great Depression, the early members of Larchmont Avenue Church bravely committed themselves to building a new structure on this site to house their vibrant and growing community. The beautiful rock structure of this sanctuary was completed and dedicated shortly thereafter on November 2, 1930.

Think about all the milestones that have been crossed in the decades since: baptisms and communions; Christmases and Easters; graduations and commencements; joyful weddings and painful funerals. Each one of them significant milestones in significant lives. Each one of them part of the enduring story of a people and a faith. This sanctuary is so much more than a pile of stones along a busy street. They are a reminder, a sign, and a symbol of the fact that the living God is among us.

This year, we add another significant milestone to the many that have occurred in and around this memorial built with stone. When our founder Emily Lindsley was working hard to start a new congregation in the Reformed tradition in Larchmont, she imagined what she called "a seven-day church for a seven-day need." Fifty-five years later, the church's Sunday School classrooms were always busy and full on Sunday mornings, but they were largely empty for the rest of the week. As Larchmont continued to grow by leaps and bounds, a committed group of LAC members saw a need in the community and an opportunity for the church to serve that need. So, in 1974, the Larchmont Avenue Church Preschool opened its doors for the first time.

It all began with one class. They were all four years old. And this is the detail I love the most: there were *twelve* of them. Twelve four-year-olds gathered together in a sweet little group was a humble beginning, but they also proved to be a rock-solid foundation. The 1st Epistle of Peter gives us an interesting metaphor. It urges us to come to God as living stones – of the earth but also precious in God's sight. "*Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.*"¹ Those early leaders saw a need, saw an opportunity, and God gave them twelve little stones, and those leaders gathered them together with hope and conviction, and here we are, so many years later, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the house they built with living stones.

When you walk by these buildings, when you pass by these rock buildings at the corners of Larchmont, Forest Park, and Wendt Avenues, we can ask ourselves the same question Joshua asked on that first day in the Promised Land: What do these stones mean to us? I want to offer three ways that these buildings that represent our fellowship of faith can help us and shape us and guide us.

One thing these stones can do is to serve as **an aid to navigation**. Back in my Boy Scouting days I was lucky enough to go on a backpacking trip to Philmont Scout Ranch in

¹ 1 Peter 2:4-5.

New Mexico. The highlight was an ascent of Baldy Mountain, the highest peak in the Cimarron Range. The top of the mountain is nothing but a huge rock field, and as you look ahead toward the summit it can be easy to lose the trail. That is why people who walked the trail before us left a series of cairns, or small stacks of rocks, to mark the way. Those monuments directed our steps and showed us the way. Our church does the same. As we travel through life, monuments like this one are vital guides, helping us to avoid pitfalls and snares, and keeping us on the straight and narrow paths that lead to God's own heart.

Memorials of stone can also keep us mindful of losses that have shaped us... **losses we do not want to forget.** At the end of the movie *Schindler's List*, director Stephen Spielberg included a long procession in which the survivors of the Holocaust who owed their lives to Oskar Schindler, along with the actors who had played them in the movie, all filed by his grave to place a stone on his tombstone. In Jewish tradition, such a gesture is a powerful act of remembrance, respect, and gratitude.²

Up the road here in Larchmont, just a few feet away from the post road milestone, are several other stone monuments. One is a memorial to those in Larchmont who paid the ultimate sacrifice in World War I. Another is a tribute to Larchmont police officers who gave their lives in the line of duty. That stone also holds a plaque in memory of people with Larchmont roots or connections who were killed in the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11. Here in our own stack of rocks, shining light down upon us this morning, was installed in 1947 in honor of God and in remembrance of the men and women of LAC who served in the Armed Forces during World War II. The selfless sacrifices and dedication of those who came before us have shaped who we are, and memorials of stone help us to remember those important parts of ourselves.

Last but not least, monuments of stone can **mark the successful end of a climb.** Summit cairns, as they are called, indicate to climbers that they have indeed reached their goal and made it to the highest point on the mountain. They often contain a waterproof container where climbers can add their names to the register of those who have completed the challenge made it to the top.³ While the twelve stones stacked by Joshua and the priests of Israel was not on a mountaintop, it certainly marked the ceremonial end of a harrowing 40-year journey through the wilderness. Beginning with the marker made with those first twelve stones, Gilgal would become a place where the people of Israel would continually return. Every time their eyes would fall upon the monument, they were reminded of the power, guidance, and love of God that had carried them so far. To use Joshua's words, the rocks were a reminder that the living God was among them.

These are all ways that these monuments of stones can be, for us, a memorial forever, but it is important for us to know that the lifeless stones around us are not the church. They can be shelter for us, they can be a guide for us, they can remind us of important sacrifices, losses, victories, and accomplishments. But they are not the church. The church is comprised of the "living stones" Peter was talking about – people who have offered themselves to God in faith and service in the hope that God might use them to build a spiritual house. And that is exactly what God has done here in this place.

So, today, we remember that the enduring monument at Gilgal began simply, with twelve normal stones taken from the riverbed. Through the grace and blessing of God,

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/putting-stones-on-jewish-graves/>

³ <http://blog.theclymb.com/tips/ancient-art-reading-rock-cairns/>

those stones became a sign, a symbol, and a memorial forever. Today, you and I are invited to throw ourselves, as living stones, into the river, so that we too can become part of the story of the people of God. *"You are a chosen race,"* Peter writes. *"You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."* Like living stones, we make ourselves available to God, tossing ourselves into the mighty river of living water, God's work in the world.

Did Joshua know how impactful those twelve stones would be? Probably not.

When the members of LAC committed themselves to building this sanctuary in the depths of the Great Depression, giving small items of gold, silver, and other trinkets just to fend off foreclosure and keep the dream alive, could they have envisioned us here this morning, nearly a century later, still cultivating and maintaining the ministry they started? Maybe yes, maybe no.

Could the twelve 4-year-olds in the first LAC Preschool Class know what they were helping to begin? No.

When we toss ourselves as living stones into the river of God's work, we have no idea what kind of ripple effects we may create. Whatever good the splash may cause, however those ripples might travel out into the world, we leave all that for the higher power of God to determine. In the meantime, we can be guided by the sacred milestones God has posted for us, moved by the sacred memorials God erects for us, and inspired by the victories God gives to us. And in the times to come, when we pass the sheltering monuments of Larchmont Avenue Church and the children ask, "What do these stones mean to you?" we can tell them the story of what has happened here, what continues to happen here, and how this place still helps us to know that the living God is alive and well among us.

Amen.