

Date: May 28-29, 2022

Title: *An Everlasting Memorial*

Scripture: Joshua 4:1-7;19-24

Speaker: George Palombo

Well, good morning, everyone. My name is George Palombo, and I am on staff here as the care pastor, and it's my privilege to be here with you all this morning and to get to share.

You know, historically, Christians have not had the freedom to gather the way we have today. And we owe a great debt to those who have gone before us and died and spilled their blood so that we can still meet here today for one of our most foundational freedoms, which is the freedom to gather and worship openly. You know, we can look back, and in the first opening centuries of the church, there was a fellow by the name of Tertullian who was one of our early church fathers and you may be a little familiar with a quote that he had where he said these words.

He said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And the fact is that this quote served as a tribute to those who had laid down their lives for the sake of the kingdom and the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. We think of men like Saint Stephen, who was the first recorded Christian martyr. We think of men like Polycarp who was burned at the stake.

Or Telemachus, if you remember Telemachus' story from ancient Rome, where he almost single-handedly ended the gladiatorial games when he went into the Colosseum and faced two gladiators, and one of them rammed him through with a sword, that the games ended in the Colosseum.

We can think of men like Wycliffe and Huss and Lithgow and women like Catherine Hutt and Elizabeth Thackley. The name goes on the voluminous names of those who have given their lives so that the seed of the church continues by the blood of the martyrs.

With much the same theme, Revolutionary War poet Thomas Campbell paid tribute to soldiers who fought in the American Revolution with similar words that serve also as a reminder for us today, because we would not have the freedoms that we hold dear if it were not for the sacrifice of these patriots. And quoting Campbell, he writes, "The patriot's blood is the seed of freedom's tree."

So, today we remember fallen soldiers and we need to keep in mind, too, that whether they were pagan, atheist, agnostic, Baha'i, Muslim, or whatever, we owe a debt of gratitude to them because, again, the spilling of their blood and their sacrifice allows us as believers to freely meet in this space today. So, will you pray with me before we get started?

Almighty God, your word tells us that a good name, a good reputation, is more desirable than even great riches. To be esteemed is better than silver or gold. Or do we pray that bearing the name of American will be honorable to you, or that you would make us a people desiring to honor you and your law, that you would give us hearts of repentance for our individual and national sins?

For you have made all the peoples of the Earth for your glory to serve you in freedom and in peace. And Lord, this morning we also remember our brothers and sisters in Texas whom we pray for and lift up. The families who are suffering and grieving at their own memorial sites today of little ones and their families. Lord, we ask that you're gracious and merciful to them this morning.

And finally, Lord, we pray that you give to the people of the United States of America a zeal for your truth, justice, and strength of forbearance that we might exercise our liberties in accordance with your holy will because we ask these things in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know, we're all familiar with memorials, and God is familiar with memorials as well because he's established a number of them. One of the first memorials that we see anywhere in Scripture is in Genesis 9, 13 through 15, where we read, "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."

So, we're familiar with memorials and monuments and memorial parks and parades. There will be memorial parades this weekend and signs and towns named after things as memorials, also that we remember to remember. I find that remembering becomes a little more difficult. As I get older, I don't know about you, and I mused once in a while that I sometimes need an administrative assistant just to remind me to look at my reminders because we have a tendency to forget.

We forget things. And we're going to see in this narrative this morning that God has set up some memorials as well in order for us to remember. And this morning, we're going to be referencing the first four chapters of the Book of Joshua. And just to let

you know, this is going to be a topical message. Actually, it's going to be more of a skim message.

We can almost surf through it really quickly. It's the account of the nation of Israel after 40 years of wandering in the desert where God brings them to the precipice of the Jordan River, and they are getting ready to cross over it into the promised land. It's the account of a god of the nation of Israel as they prepare to do these things.

The promise that was made by God to Abraham and all of his seed. And they have reached this moment of remembrance. If you're not familiar with Joshua, chapter one opens with Moses dying, and Moses is now gone. And God is about to appoint Joshua. And he does appoint Joshua in the first chapter of this book. And he says, I'm going to do amazing things through my servant Joshua.

Because Moses led them out of Egypt 40 years earlier. And now, here is Joshua going to lead them into the promised land. So, Joshua has now been installed as God's man to lead the nation of Israel. There you go. There's Joshua one. We are moving really quickly this morning. I'll get you out of here in 30 or 90 minutes.

Chapter two. And you can read this on your own. But chapter two goes on and it gives us the familiar story of Rahab. And the spies are hidden by Rahab, who's a gentile and she promises that she will cover for them as they go off into Jericho. And they bring back that report to Joshua and here's what the report says.

It says, in chapter two, verse 24, "The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands." You notice the verbiage there doesn't say that the spies came back and said to Joshua, we got this. Dude, you should see what's happening out there. We are more powerful. It doesn't say that. It says the Lord has given the land into our hands.

This is a recording of our humble recognition of what God has done and that they are remembering what God has done in the past, and they are reminded of what God is about to do. And there's chapter two almost done. So, we're not going to read the whole account this morning of chapters three and four. But in chapter four, beginning in verse one, we read these words we read when the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into

the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

And then in verse 19 on the 10th day of the first day of the month, which incidentally, the first day of the 10th month is exactly 40 years later to the day that they had crossed over out of Egypt at the Exodus. "On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.

He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their parents, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God."

May God richly bless the reading of His Word to our ears and to our hearts this morning. So, this weekend, time-honored traditions will begin early in the morning, and in local communities across the nation, there will be flags on the streets. They'll be headstones adorned with flags and cemeteries and memorial parks as families remember their loved ones lost maybe in wartime. Bands will play, and streets will be lined with banners.

Memorial Day is a time for us to remember as American people. Families will be visiting memorial headstones. Those memorial headstones will point to something. They'll point to a life lived or a life given up or a life lost. They serve as reminders that we might more deeply ingrain into our memory, not only so that we don't forget those things in a moment, but so that we remember them forever. Perhaps our own children will ask questions like those Israeli children were directed to ask. They might ask, Mom, Dad, what's this memorial for? Why don't we do this on Memorial Day?

What does this point to? What's the purpose of this? Why are all these names listed on these huge memorial headstones? Why all these memorials in Arlington? I know as a fidgeting kid at Hopewell Memorial Junior High School when I was just a little

boy, I knew there was a sacredness about these gatherings. You couldn't ignore the hush in the crowd during these gatherings.

Sometimes you could hear the flag whipping in the wind, maybe on a cold or rainy morning. Because there was a tribute being paid to honor those who had given their lives on our behalf. And that was a time of remembrance. And I understood it well. I knew why I was there. I knew the cost.

Personally, I had heard my own grandmother's testimony of how the news came when she received notification that her son, Private First Class Joseph Palombo, was missing in action on September 3rd, 1950 in Korea. I remember hearing those stories. It wasn't until three weeks later, three grievous weeks later, that my grandmother would find out that my father had actually been picked up in a river after he had been shot and he'd contracted malaria.

And finally, three weeks later in a hospital, she got word of that. I always wondered, why didn't he just call her and tell her? In the 1950s, everybody didn't have a telephone. 60% of families had telephones and my grandmother was not one of them. He would spend months recovering in a military hospital and he would be given a memorial scar where a bullet had blown out his back from his neck, and he'd be given a memorial, Purple Heart. And he was fortunate because many men and many women were given that posthumously.

So, memorials and Memorial Day are important to us. They move us beyond the past, into the present, to give us future hope. And I want to quickly point out, that if you go home and read this entire narrative in Joshua, you're going to find that there's a lot of starting and stopping. You're going to see that they are in the river, they're out of the river, they set up stones, and they're back in the river.

And you're kind of wondering, what's the linear logic that's going on? And sometimes we forget that we're reading a Hebrew narrative. And in this case, this is called parallel theological construction. And if you've been through Core Christianity, incidentally, this is a little plug. I'm going to take a moment to plug Core Christianity which starts this Tuesday, where we're going to be studying the book of Jonah. But if you've been through the How to Read Your Bible Class, you would know to begin to start asking questions here, because this particular passage would have served the Israel people with several things.

It would have given them a cultural context. It would have also really given them what I consider to be a bit of a catechism for them and would also serve as a military record

for them. So, we just need to be mindful of these things before we dive into the text. So, this morning, I want to just draw up three points in this text.

The first thing is that God brings the people to the river and he has them stop. We read that they stop and spend the night before crossing over. It's as if the Lord is saying to them before they cross over. He's saying, hey, guys, I just want you to sit and remember for a minute. Remember now, it's the 40th anniversary. They're getting ready to celebrate Passover as a nation. And here they are 40 years later to the day. They have got a lot to think about. And God is saying, I don't want you rushing right on in there and thinking that this is you who is able to do this. I want you to take note of what I'm about to do because that's just like us.

Sometimes we'll go rushing into things and think that we have accomplished something in our own power, and we'll lose sight of the fact that it is God who accomplishes things on our behalf. When He makes his promises to us, he also gives them some time to consider the fact that the Jordan River at this time was at flood stage.

And typically, the Jordan River would have been about 100 feet wide and about ten feet deep, and that would have been impressive enough. But during the flood stage, the river could be as much as a mile wide and 12 or more feet deep and rushing violently. It ran from the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee all the way down to the Dead Sea.

And they were going to move 3 million people across this river. So, God has them stop and consider how absolutely impossible what they are about to do is to them in their own power. God wanted them to see how big their problem was and what they were up against, to maybe even take a minute and consider what their disobedience cost them 40 years earlier.

You know, sometimes God will do this. He'll take and put us at the precipice of something great. And He'll make us wait maybe a day, a week, sometimes a month, maybe a year of striving and trying to understand. It makes us ask questions like, how big is this adversary? How big are the obstacles in front of me? Lord, really? We're going to take on the nation of England. You're about to do something of that magnitude. So, sometimes the Lord calls us to stop and remember.

The second thing I want to look at this morning is the Lord also called them to look. He called them to look and to look to the Ark of the Covenant. In Joshua 3 verses 3 and 4, we read these words. "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and

follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it."

What he's saying is to stay separate, but keep it in view. Look, but keep your distance. You know, these many cubits are over half a mile and it gives them an opportunity to get a panoramic view of what God is about to do at the River Jordan.

It also gives them a chance to see who's in charge of what's happening here. And then God calls them and says, do not go near it. A lot of gods say that because God is holy and the Ark of the Covenant was a representation of the holiness of God. We heard in one of our songs this morning that God is holy, holy, holy. It's the only attribute of God that is ever repeated three times in a row in all the Scripture. God says I am holy. And we have a tendency in our day to think that, you know, God is like our buddy. You know, if we caught up with him somewhere, we might give him a high five and thank him.

But the fact is, God is the God of the Old Testament and is the same God of the New Testament. He has not changed. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. And when we come into His presence, we're to come in with a posture of His Holiness. If you remember when Jesus was on the Sea of Galilee and the boat was about to go down, the disciples were terrified, and they said, Jesus what are you doing? You're sleeping down there.

Jesus got up and in one word, He's stopped the sea. And it says that the disciples were just excited and high-fiving Jesus, weren't they? No, they were terrified. They were terrified after the thing that they should have been terrified about was over because they said these words. In terror they said, what manner of man is this when we come face to face with a holy and glorified person of God, we are to stop and we're to revere Him.

Even the angels cover their faces and their feet in the presence of God. He's the same God who told Moses, take your sandals off the ground. Where you're standing is holy ground. So, the ark was never to be their God. It was never their God. But a reminder, the ark served as a reminder when they saw it going out before them.

And it pointed to the living and the true God who was actually leading them. The Ark was to serve as a memorial to them. Look to the Ark. Why did they look to the Ark? Because the Ark pointed to a greater reality than the Ark itself. Even the Ark couldn't contain God. The Scriptures tell us that all of heaven and earth cannot contain the person of God.

We might be tempted to think that the Ark contained God. One of our other staff members and I were talking this past week about, hey, wouldn't it be awesome if the Ark of the Covenant was found. What would we do if the Ark of the Covenant was found? We would probably immediately idolize it and chase after it and think that there's something in it that is so special.

We might often be tempted to think that things sometimes contain God or a song contains God or a relationship contains God. But we're reminded in First Kings, Behold the heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain the Lord God. But God did promise them to be present in a very, very real way and in the Ark of the Covenant, not magically.

It wasn't a magic show, not in some pagan or mystical way, but in a very real way that God had outlined for their particular benefit. Every detail of the Ark pointed to a greater heavenly reality. We read in Hebrews 85 that the Ark reminds us that the Ark and the Temple on Earth are a mere copy and a mere shadow of a greater reality which it points to in Heaven. They were to see the Ark and remember their God.

I also want to point out this morning that remembering for the Hebrew mind was no mere mental exercise. This is something that when they thought about remembering, they fully engaged in it. They remembered what God did in the past, what He was about to do in the present and the future, hope that they had because of the faithfulness of God's promises in the past. They fully engaged. They were to look to this memorial and remember the living God.

I told this story several years ago in a chapel in a different context, but it bears repeating. And so, I beg your indulgence if you heard this a few years ago, but there was a great emperor in the Far East. He was growing old and he knew it was time to choose his successor. He didn't have any children so he decided to do something a little different.

He called all the people of the kingdom together and made an announcement. It's time for me to step down and choose the next emperor. And I have decided to choose one of your children. Well, the entire kingdom was stunned, especially the kids. But the emperor continued, I'm going to give each one of you in this kingdom, each one of you children, a seed, a very special seed.

And I want you to plant that seed, and I want you to water it and care for it and nurture it. And one year from today, I want you to bring back what you've grown from that seed and I will then choose the next emperor by the one who brings forth the

truest and most noble offering. And then, after all that comes in, then the pot containing that noble fruit will be transferred to the Grand Royal Garden as an everlasting memorial for generations to come, so that every year people may see and remember what the King did here today.

Well, one little boy there, his name was Mojtaba, and he, like the other kids, received a seed and he was excited. And he went home and he told his mom the story and they got a pot out and they planted it and he began to water it and care for it. He talked to it. He coached it. He sang to it. He did everything he could do to think about how to make it grow. And after a few weeks or so, some of the other youths in the area began to talk about their seeds and their plants and what was beginning to sprout. Mojtaba, just kept checking, patiently, waiting for his seed to grow.

Three, four, or five weeks went by, but nothing in his pot. Everyone else had beautiful sapling trees and tall flowering plants, rich and full of brilliant colors. But Mojtaba had nothing. He didn't say anything to his friends. He just kept waiting for a seed to grow. A year later went by, and all the youth of the kingdom brought their plants to the emperor for inspection.

And Mojtaba told his mom, I can't do it. I just can't take my seed to the emperor. I'm ashamed of myself. But his mother told him, Mojtaba, just go and be honest. When Mojtaba arrived, he was amazed at what he had seen. Even in his anxiety, he looked around and thought, wow, this is something spectacular.

But he just shrunk back in the back row. A couple of kids walked by and said, hey, man, nice try. Maybe next time. When the emperor arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted the young people. Mojtaba just hid in the back. What great plants and trees and flowers you have grown, said the emperor. Today, one of you is going to be appointed king.

And he says he scanned the room. He spotted Mojtaba in the back with an empty pot, and he called him forward. Mojtaba was like, oh, my goodness, perhaps the king is going to kill me. By now, all the kids were laughing and openly mocking him. The emperor asked everyone to quiet down. He looked Mojtaba square in the eye. And he felt the sting of the king's glance.

And then, to Mojtaba's utter astonishment, the king thundered to the crowd. Behold your new emperor, Mojtaba. What? Mojtaba thought. I can't even care for a single seed and make it grow. How am I going to be the emperor of an entire nation? And then the emperor boldly announced one year ago today, I gave everyone here a seed, a seed that would never, ever grow. It was a boiled and dead seed.

All of you, except Mojtaba, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed wouldn't grow, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you in an attempt to deceive your emperor, all for personal gain. Only Mojtaba had the courage and honesty to bring me my seed, the one that would honor me today.

And on that very day, Mojtaba's dirty old pot with the dead seed was placed on a golden stand in the Emperor's Royal Garden as an everlasting memorial to the people in the kingdom of what Mojtaba had done, no, of what the king had done on that day. It was a sign of what the King had done on that day.

So, while God sometimes asks us to stop and look, and those are important things, he also calls us to listen. We must stop. We must look. We must listen. You see, there's no magic in any memorial, no matter what it is. The memorial itself is lifeless and can easily become an idol. So, there's always a story behind what we stop and what we see.

Joshua writes, remember when your children ask you, what do these stones mean? There's a story to be told. Tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the Ark of the Covenant. You know, if we miss listening to the story, we can easily end up worshipping the pot or a stone instead of the thing that it points to. And here's why. Because we forget. We'll stop at the pot. We'll look at the pot, but we'll forget the story behind the pot. And before you know it, we'll be left gathering around that pot every year. Sitting around the pot, having barbecues, having mattress sales, 40% off your car. Because the pot becomes the thing.

And then we'll bicker and we'll divide over how we should worship the pot, whether we should do it classically or contemporarily, because we forget God's story and what God has done and what He has called us to remember. We will idolize things instead of the one who gives us things. We will idolize creatures instead of the creator, Romans tells us, instead of the Creator who is forever blessed.

So, we must listen. But to who? You know we love to hear stories about men, the history of their greatness of them, of valor, the nobility of men and we want to be like them. And you know what? That's okay. It's okay to do that as long as we recognize that every story about men fades in the light of the author of those stories.

Percy Shelley's *Ozymandias*, if you know this poem. It captures in one brief illustration that men without number have set up memorials under themselves in honor of themselves to glorify themselves for themselves, apart from the living God. He writes,

"I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said - "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Well, this is the end of every single memorial that is set up to glorify man or to glorify self. You know, Joshua could have been tempted at this time to channel Moses and say, hey, everybody, I want you to gather around. We're going to talk about what Moses would have done. He didn't do that. He said these words, come and hear and listen to the Lord, your God. Come and hear the Word of God. Why? Why the Word of God? Because our hearts are prone to wonder, as the hymn writer tells us, prone to wonder. That's who we are. We forget.

You see, God has a story that He calls us and reminds us to remember. And it's a story that He has set up on his memorial stone. It's not in honor of Moses. It's not in honor of Abraham. It's not in honor of Joshua. It's not in honor of Martin Luther. It's not in honor of Rosa Parks. It's not in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. This is a memorial stone that he has set up and it's the one that he looks to.

I hope and pray that when we leave here this morning, we will all leave with deeply patriotic hearts for our country. Yesterday, before preparing for this message, I walked around this auditorium and I prayed that no one would leave here today without recognizing a need to explore and examine that God himself has set up his own memorial stone, and he remembers that stone the apostle Peter speaks of this memorial stone in his letter.

First Peter, 2:6, he's quoting Isaiah, and he says this is the Lord speaking. "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

You know, if we brought every soldier who ever died in battle and we brought every martyr who ever suffered and died back, and we put them on this stage this morning, Christian or non-Christian, if there is a living and true God and we asked them to tell us a story, without exception, they would step forward and say, my story is meaningless in light of the story that God has written on his memorial stone. The memorial that he sees and looks at. Because my story is just part of a larger story. The story that God remembers, His story, Christ, the memorial stone of God, the one God recognizes. The one who God is faithful to. The one God looks to.

There are countless headstones of men, good and wicked, and memorials set up to them without number. But you know what? Every one of those men are dead and gone, or soon will be. But First Peter 4 tells us this, "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him." God remembers that stone. You know, when God sees that memorial headstone, he remembers not us, but his son.

In First John 19, we read these words. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." The question is what is he faithful to? Is he faithful to my sorrow and my repentance? Noah says he is faithful and he is just because of something that was done for us in memoriam on a Hill 2,000 years ago. That's what God is faithful to. That is the memorial stone that is set in eternity of whom Christ is the chief cornerstone. He is the memorial and living stone of the Lord God. And those of us who place our hope and our trust in Him will never, ever be put to shame or sin.

Would you please pray with me? As we close, Heavenly Father, we pray that above all things this weekend, we remember those who have gone before us and helped us secure the freedoms that we enjoy today. But at the end of the day, ultimately, we would remember your son and pay our ultimate tribute at the foot of the cross where his blood was shed. Lord, the place of your memorial where your stone is said that we might forever look to him. The author, the finisher of our faith, and when we enter into glory, that we would see the nail printed memorial hands and feet inside of the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And we would praise and worship you because of him, your living stone set in Zion because it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Everybody, have a wonderful Memorial Day weekend.