

## **“Thanksgiving Consecrated in Stone”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

11-17-19 Consecration Sunday

Based upon Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-28; Isaiah 12

In Israel, the valley in between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim is a holy place. It is the place where God first addressed Abram in Canaan, after leading him all the way from Haran to the new land that God had promised to give him. It is a place where after a lifetime of being a cheat and a trickster, Jacob cast aside his foreign gods and naughty ways, in order to serve Yahweh, and where he also dug a well that centuries later, would mark the spot where a certain Samaritan woman would become the first Samaritan to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The valley is the place where the patriarch Joseph’s bones were buried after the divinely-liberated Hebrew slaves carried them all the way back from Egypt, and where the first capital of the northern kingdom of Israel was established. It is the place where twice Joshua invited the people of Israel to renew the covenant that Yahweh had made with Moses and the people’s ancestors in the Sinai wilderness; all of this happened in this holy valley because this was where the ancient city of Shechem once stood.

Shechem, scholars have argued, is the second most holy city in all of Israel’s history after Jerusalem. It was located at a critical crossroads between north-south and east-west trade routes. So, all kinds of people passed through the area, bringing with them all kinds of idols and objects. Recognizing that to live in such a commercially-active and ethnically-diverse location would provide a great deal of temptation to the Israelites, Joshua, not long after he led the people into the Promised Land, invited the people to renew their covenant promises to Yahweh in a way they wouldn’t soon forget. He put the Ark of the Covenant between the two mountains. Then he divided the people so that half stood in front of Mount Gerizim, and the other half in front of Mt. Ebal. After he read the Law to them, he had one group shout out the blessings that would come to them all from serving Yahweh. Then he had the other group shout out the curses that would come to them if they build their lives on false gods instead. When everyone, including men and women, young and old, Hebrew and foreigner knew exactly what they were getting into, they made their pledges of faithfulness to Yahweh and the Mosaic Covenant. Then Joshua set up an altar there and marked the spot with a stone pillar.<sup>1</sup>

The second time Joshua had a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem was near the end of his ministry. There had been lots of battles with the Canaanites and other enemies by then, as the 12 tribes had tried to take and preserve their territory. So much had happened that Joshua was an old man, getting his spiritual house in order so that he could die. One of the things he wanted to do before that happened was to have the people of Israel consecrate themselves before God one more time. So, he gathered all the tribes together again at Shechem. This time he didn’t require the mountain shouting. He simply told the story of all that God had done for the people beginning with the story of Abraham and ending with the acknowledgment that God had kept God’s promises to him, by giving the land to them, Abraham’s descendants. Then Joshua presented the people with a now famous choice: “Choose whom you will serve,” he said, “but as

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<sup>1</sup> *The Geographical, Historical, & Spiritual Significance of Shechem*, Bible.org, <https://bible.org/article/geographical-historical-spiritual-significance-shechem>.

for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.” This time, when the people said, “We will serve Yahweh,” he wasn’t willing to take their promise at face value because he had learned since the last covenant renewal ceremony that their talk and walk weren’t always in sync. “You can’t serve the Lord” he argued. “No, we will!” they insisted. “OK,” he said. “But you are witnesses against yourselves.” Then he found another witness just to make the deal more legally binding. The witness was in the form of another stone which he set up as a permanent record of their renewed promise. History calls this the “witness stone,” or in some translations, “the listening stone.” When the ancient ruins of Shechem were finally discovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the stone outside the Temple, an image of which is on your bulletin cover, was still there marking the spot where the people consecrated themselves to God, that is, where they “set themselves apart from the world” by promising to serve God.

We spent some time last week considering the importance of choosing and investing in God’s way over the world’s way, so I’m not going to rehash that today using another text. But as we contemplate consecrating both a percentage of our financial resources, and our time and talents toward God’s service today, I would like us to ponder for a minute the image of the witness stone, because I think that stone is where the faithful stewardship of our lives in general, and of this church specifically intersect. Several weeks ago, I spoke about Peter’s image of the Church as living stones, a spiritual house made up of faithful believers. That is what we are called to be. But for the time being at least, until the Church universal is transformed completely by the Spirit into a Church without walls, this particular collection of living stones meets in a building made of actual stones, or at least bricks, concrete and mortar. This building is a witness to the promises of the people inside it. It is the external object which speaks to the internal commitment of our hearts.

You’ve undoubtedly heard the expression “if these walls could talk,” an expression that makes me wonder if maybe it was born, once upon a time, out of today’s witness stone reference. Our walls can’t talk, but as witness stones they have listened to more than fifty years of faithful Christian activity in this church. They have heard the voices of young and old lifted up in song, consistently praising God with joy throughout the eras of the me-generation and yuppie materialism, through stock market crashes and rises, through the shock and grief of 9-11, various wars in the Middle East, too many acts of mass violence, and innumerable political controversies. Joined by bells and chimes, plus euphonium, cello, violin, flute, recorders and trumpets, the voices have praised the Lord under the shepherding of multiple pastors, and despite decades of denominational battles about ordination and marriage, and session concerns about inadequate budgets and more. But praise isn’t the only thing our listening stones have heard. They have also heard people again and again make the vows that set them aside to serve as officers – elders and deacons – regardless of their ages or years of service, because they take their commitment to serve Christ in and through the Church so seriously. Our stones have heard us laugh and groan as we set up and packed up millions of books through the years to raise money for mission, and commissioned people to do relief work in Mississippi and New Jersey and our own West County, gathered food and money for the hungry, provided assistance and presents to the poor, and prepared to teach second graders with love. Our walls have heard babies laugh and squeal through worship, children teach us the Good News of God-with-us, and the importance of caring for others, and young and old weeping as we celebrated saints who now

rest in peace. Our listening stones have heard close to 3000 sermons, and probably as many conversations in Sunday school and Soup and Scripture about the Word of God, and the work of Christ, and the call of discipleship. They have heard desperate prayers in wholeness services, and community groups helping those battling addiction, coping with death and divorce, and connecting people together through music, yoga, scouting and more. These walls are witness to the fact that we take our vows seriously in this Church, and serve Jesus Christ with dedication, imagination, and love.

Recognizing that, today when we are once again invited to recognize that God has set us apart for service by pledging our resources both to God's work in the world and to the preservation of these specific witness stones around us, I don't want us to think about the day as a "have-to" moment in the life of the church that we all wish we could skip. I want us to recognize that today is a "get to" or "want to" day instead. As Episcopal priest Robert N. Rodenmayer once put it,

"There are three kinds of giving: grudge giving, duty giving, and thanksgiving. Grudge giving says, "I have to," duty giving says, "I ought to," thanksgiving says, "I want to." The first comes from constraint, the second from a sense of obligation, the third from a full heart. Nothing much is conveyed in grudge giving since "The gift without the giver is bare." Something more happens in duty giving, but there is no song in it. Thanksgiving is an open gate into the love of God."<sup>2</sup>

Today is a day for full-hearted thanksgiving, for taking stock of all the many ways that God has blessed us. I won't read for us the story of all the God has done for humanity from Abraham to the present, as Joshua did, or we would be here quite a while; and I won't make us divide in two and shout blessings and curses at each other, although that might be fun for at least some of us. I simply want us to use today to recognize all the reasons we have to be grateful because that is part of consecration too. The definition of the word is "to set apart or make holy;" but in the Hebrew, to "consecrate" literally means "with full hands," because most of the consecrating done by the Levitical priests was the dedication of sacrifices and gifts to the Lord. So, they always approached the altar in the Temple with their hands full.

Today, whether we consider ourselves rich or poor by the world's standards, and whether we are long-time members or first-time visitors, we come before God with full hands. They are full because of all God had done for us in Jesus Christ, showering us with overflowing grace, and teaching us all we need to know to have abundant life. They are full because God has given us this place where we can come when the world is joyful or terrifying, and know that here we are valued, here we are gifted, here we have purpose and help, and are not alone. They are full because whatever the future holds, we know that it will include love and hope because God is with us.

"Surely God is my salvation," the prophet Isaiah proclaimed. "I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might.... Give thanks to the Lord, call on his

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Phillippe, William R., [A Stewardship Scrapbook](#) (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 116.

name; make known his deeds among the nations, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.” Let the people of God, speaking for the stones who cannot speak but witness to every word, say, “Amen,” today and every day, not just with our voices, but with our hearts, hands, voices, and lives. Amen.