

Series: Transition

March 29, 2020

Title: Stones in the River

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Text: Joshua 4

Find a Stone

“Out of the Blue”

Sunday was a very hard day. When I turned on my phone I found a message from Donna telling me that my dear friend Peter had gone home to be with the Lord. His long battle was over.

After breakfast, Suzanne and I sat down on the couch to do church online. Just before we started the online service, I noticed that I had a message waiting for me in Facebook Messenger. It came from a man named Daniel Nzabonimpa. He had written:

“It is much possible, you could be my teacher from Rwanguba Bible School? By Daniel from Congo.”

“Could this be Roland Ludlam, former missionary in Zaire?”

When I told him I was that Roland Ludlam he replied:

“Thank you Bwana Roland? How are you? Many many years. Glory be to God, you have responded. Roland Ludlam is it you really? Amazing amazing.”

Talk about something coming out of the blue! You could have knocked me over with a feather. Daniel was indeed one of my Bible School students – bright, energetic, engaged, full of questions. Just the kind of student any teacher would love to have.

And here we were chatting on Facebook in March 2020. The last time I saw him was 39 years ago. I was 31. He was 19. Our worlds had changed beyond recognition in those 39 years. And now we were catching up on a Sunday morning.

A seed planted...

Daniel told me that for the last 20 years he and his family have been refugees in Kenya. During that time he has worked as a nurse and as an evangelist. The young man that I had had the privilege of teaching for a brief time had turned out to be a man of God who had faithfully poured his life into building the Kingdom of God.

I can't tell you how many times I have wondered what ever happened to my students in Congo. How did their lives turn out? Did they get caught up in the wars and disease that wrack the Congo? What could their future have been like?

At 58, Daniel isn't finished yet. He has retired from nursing, but hopes to return to Congo to establish a clinic in the city of Goma where Suzanne and I lived.

A seed planted so long ago, was nurtured by the Holy Spirit and for many years has borne good fruit.

Find a stone:

You may remember how we looked at the story of Israel crossing the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. God told the priests who carried the Ark that represented His Presence with them to go stand in the river. As soon as their feet touched the water the Jordan ceased to flow. The priests took up a position in the very middle of the river bed and Israelites crossed over on dry ground.

When they had finished crossing the Jordan, God gave a second command:

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Joshua 4:2-3 NIV

"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."

Go find a stone! Not just any stone, but one that had lain in the bottom of the river at its deepest point. A stone that lay right where God's presence was most powerful at that particular moment.

Where will you find it? Right in the middle of what was a raging river! Right in the middle of the chaos. When you go to stand in the river with God at your side, He makes a way. He stops the surging waters.

Take a stone from the riverbed. Carry it to the other side.

Memorial

“A sign among you”

When Joshua issued the order to gather the stones from the riverbed he explained their purpose:

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Joshua 4:5-7 NIV

“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.”

The stones had a story to tell: For generations to come the pile of 12 stones on the west shore of the Jordan would tell the story of what God had done. They weren't just a relic of a past event; they brought it to life in a special and undeniable way. They were part of the miracle: stones that would have forever rested on the river bottom now stood as a monument tall and proud to God's delivering power!

Daniel:

Last Sunday God brought me to one of my stones from the river. The stone wasn't an inanimate object; it was a man named Daniel. God had brought Suzanne and me to Africa. We had stepped into the river in more ways than you could ever imagine. But He had made a way. Daniel was one of those stones in the river – a young person I had taught and ministered with. Then our paths parted, seemingly forever.

Last Sunday I found myself standing on the bank of another river – the river of retirement. And far from being the peaceful transition I had planned for,

the river had risen to flood stage with the coronavirus epidemic swallowing up all of our plans. And just a few hours before, I learned of Peter's death.

But then God parted the waters and there – right beside Him – was the message from Daniel. God had a plan that was bigger than mine, bigger than circumstances, bigger than time and distance. A stone in the river for me to pick up and carry with me to the other side as a memorial to His faithfulness and His love.

Memorial:

So go find a stone right in the middle of all the chaos that surrounds us – and even separates us this Sunday morning. Let God show you what He is doing in the middle of all the craziness. Carry that blessing with you, that miracle – large or small – to the other side.

One day it will be a part of your personal story – a story you will tell your children and your grandchildren.

"Yes, I remember the epidemic of 2020. But let me tell you what God did! Let me show you my stone from the riverbed!"

Stones in the River

Gilgal:

Joshua took the 12 stones taken from the Jordan and set them up at a place called Gilgal. Then once again he told the Israelites what this monument was all about:

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Joshua 4:21-24 NIV

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."

A new Gilgal:

Today we make a new Gilgal. We build it with the stones that we have carried from the river.

Today I celebrate with you another of my stones from the river. Again, the stone is a person. His name is your new pastor, Michael Oldham.

Like Daniel, Pastor Mike was just in his teens when I first met him. I was a ripe old 30 something just getting started in pastoring here in St. Albans. Mike came to the realization that God was calling him to be a pastor. We met more times than I can remember to discuss life, church, biblical studies, theology, preaching and just about everything else.

For many years Pastor Mike has studied and learned how to pastor. And today I have the privilege of handing over the reins to him as Senior Pastor of Church of the Rock!

Mike, you will always be one my stones in the river! As I step out of the river of transition into the next thing that God has for me, rest assured that you and your ministry are part of my Gilgal monument.

And the same is true for so many of you with whom Suzanne and I have had the inestimable privilege of ministering both to and with. I cherish each one of you and will never forget your love, your faithfulness to the Lord, your generosity, your patience, your compassion, your zeal, your faith and your hope in Jesus our King.

Stones in the River:

Each one of us will add our stone to our Gilgal. And as we do, let's remember the ultimate reason that God has been so good to us. He has made a way through the rivers of chaos for us:

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Joshua 4:24 NIV

"...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."

