

Meditation – Stones of Remembrance
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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It is good to remember. In fact, it is a fundamental command of God, and practice of a faithful community, to remember. To remember the things and ways that God has been faithful to us, and the ways in which we have been faithful. It is also good to remember those that have gone before us. So, we turn today, to remember. To remember that we are God's, and that God is good. We remember those we miss and that are no longer here with us.

Those of you who are on Facebook will recognize this, but for those who aren't on Facebook, there is a feature that shows us past moments or memories. Some mornings when I pull up Facebook to check in on the world and my friends, I will see a post from years past that I created. Just the other day, there was the post of the house we now live in from a year ago when we moved in.

There was one last week from six years ago when our cat, as a kitten, became part of the family. Often, these are fond memories, things that make me smile or laugh. But sometimes, the previous posts pop up of something that was difficult or frustrating, or marking a difficult time, or the passing of a person near and dear to me. Many times, with these frustrating or sad memories, it causes me to reflect, and it leads me to prayer. Sometimes the prayers are because the situation I have been reminded of is still frustrating or enraging. But other times I utter prayers of gratitude. I am reminded of God's presence, both in the good and the bad.

It can be good to remember. But sometimes we forget to do that, and we need reminders. Reminders that God is for us and with us. In the book of Joshua, God's people have finally arrived at their new home. To get there, they need to cross the Jordan River. The story tells us that God parted the waters of the Jordan, and the people walk through the river bed on dry land to cross. To commemorate and remember how God delivered the people to their new home, to create a memorial of the event, they took twelve stones from the riverbed and stacked them on the other side. When someone would see the stones and ask what they meant, God's people would then tell the story of what happened that day and how God had helped them.

Other stories reference stones as memorials. Jacob after wrestling with the angel takes the rock he used as a pillow and consecrates it to become the pillar of God's house. The prophet Samuel raises a rock and names it "Ebenezer" to signify protection and help from God. Jesus is named as the living stone and the corner stone. All of these in some way, all of these stones of remembrance, are used as a reminder of God's faithfulness, God's care, God's help in hard times. The stones become a symbol and reminder of these attributes of God.

Remembering the faithfulness of God, and God's faithful people is, in itself a holy act. If you have ever been to a Jewish cemetery, or in a section of a cemetery where people of the Jewish faith are buried, you will often see stones on top of the grave markers. The origin of that practice is somewhat uncertain, but one Rabbi suggests that it is because the Hebrew word for "pebble" can also mean "bond." When the memorial prayer is spoken, the prayer asks that the person who has died be "bound up in the bond of life." By placing a stone, Jews show that they have been to the grave, and that the individual's memory continues to live on and through their descendants and friends.ⁱ

In addition, in Jewish teaching, the proper or appropriate thing to say after someone has died is “may her memory be a blessing.” The implication of this saying is that it is up to those who bear the memory of the deceased to keep her goodness alive. This is done by remembering the person, by speaking about them, and by carrying on their legacy and good works.

More recently, you may hear the phrase, when mentioning someone who has died, “may her memory be a revolution.” This new phrase originated from protests in Israel to highlight injustices of domestic violence and to commemorate those who had been murdered. The phrase was a way to identify and confront the deep-seated conditions that gave rise to the deaths, to work at dismantling them, and to generate active justice. The Black Lives Matter movement following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have sometimes adopted this commemoration and phrase as well.

One author notes, “In the context of Jewish law, remembrance is not a reflexive, passive process directed inward... [the] Torah commandments can [not] be fulfilled by quiet contemplation; memorialization must manifest through specific action.” That specific action can be things like protesting or passing laws, anything that creates lasting change. The writer continues, “now is not the time for silent reflection and unobtrusive mourning that stops short of implementing any fundamental change. For memory to mean anything, it must be active. It must be revolutionary.”ⁱⁱ Memory does not merely recall the past; it can also imagine a better future.

So, as we turn to remember those that we have lost, let us remember that not only is God faithful, but that we can be faithful in honoring the legacy of those we have lost by continuing the good work, the hard work of justice for a better world, to greener pastures. Let that be the legacy of the faithful.

ⁱ <https://www.jewish-funeral-home.com/why-do-jews-place-stones-or-pebbles-on-a-grave/>

ⁱⁱ Emily Burack, <https://www.heyalma.com/why-jews-say-may-her-memory-be-a-blessing-revolution-when-someone-has-died/> See also https://www.kveller.com/the-revolutionary-jewish-way-to-memorialize-george-floyd/?_ga=2.131697675.58610391.1653794482-1745844632.1653794482