

## How's that again, Jesus?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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### **Joshua 4 (NRSV)**

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and 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.'" Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua 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, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then 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." The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

The priests who bore the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people crossed over in haste. As soon as all the people had finished crossing over, the ark of the Lord, and the priests, crossed over in front of the people. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the Israelites, as Moses had ordered them. About forty thousand armed for war crossed over before the Lord to the plains of Jericho for battle. On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life. The Lord said to Joshua, "Command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, to come up out of the Jordan." Joshua therefore commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan." When the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet touched dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before. The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.

Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."

## **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

*When he wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul offered both correction and instruction. In the midst of one of the corrections, there was this instruction about the Sacrament of Holy Communion — or the Lord's Supper.*

What I handed down to you, I myself received from the Lord: that, on the night when he was handed over, the Lord Jesus took bread, and, after giving thanks, he broke it. And he said, "This is my body, for your sake. Do this as a way to remember me." And after supper, he did the same thing with the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as a way to remember me, every time you drink it." Because every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

## **Children's Story**

It was the 4th of July. Tammy and Timmy Terwilliger were riding in the family van with their mom and dad. They were on their way to grandmother's house for a big 4th of July party.

They drove over the river. They drove through the woods. They drove down a long highway. They drove and they drove and they drove.

Tammy said, "Are we there yet?"

A few minutes later, Timmy said, "Are we there yet?"

A few minutes after that, Tammy said it again. "Are we there yet?"

Mrs. Terwilliger had a headache, and hearing the same question over and over again did not help. So she told the kids to be patient. She told them to watch the mile markers along the highway. She told them they could have a piece of candy every fifteen miles. But they had to stop asking, "Are we there yet?"

Mrs. Terwilliger's idea worked. Tammy and Timmy watched those mile markers closely. While they watched, Mrs. Terwilliger enjoyed a little peace of mind. And every fifteen miles, the kids enjoyed a piece of candy.

Of course, the trip they were taking wasn't about candy at all. It was about getting to their grandmother's house for a big 4th of July party. But there was nothing wrong with having little celebrations along the way.

And that's just what they did. Mrs. Terwilliger quietly celebrated her peace of mind, while Tammy and Timmy celebrated a piece of candy every fifteen miles.

## **Sermon**

Some anniversaries are more important than others. Jan and I didn't celebrate our anniversary this year. It was our twenty-sixth. Big deal. But last year, our twenty-fifth? That was important. We even went away for a few days, just the two of us.

This year is the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of our denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America. That's worth celebrating, though not without a certain amount of sadness over what happened one hundred fifty years ago. After all, our denomination was born through a church split. A split in the church of Jesus Christ is always a cause for grief.

And then we have what happened fifty years ago. While the Christian Reformed Church celebrated its centennial, complete with the publication of the blue *Psalter Hymnal*, somewhere below the radar, the Olentangy Christian Reformed Church was formally organized. The little church in Columbus, started some years earlier, had grown up — grown up enough to ordain elders and deacons, grown up enough to pay (and to be expected to pay) ministry shares ("quotas," we used to call them). Fifty years ago.

**Fifty years is not a long time by most measures.** The church of Jesus Christ is much older than fifty years old. The church's birthday is typically traced to the day of Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit, almost two thousand years ago. Yet, in our tradition we count things differently. The

Heidelberg Catechism says that Christ “gathers, protects, and preserves [a people] for himself,” and that he does this “from the beginning of the world to its end” (A 54). So the church of Christ stretches back beyond two thousand years, stretches back as far as can be remembered, then farther still. What’s fifty years next to that?

Actually, fifty years isn’t much, even compared to more than a few churches right here in the city of Columbus. There are churches in Columbus that are much older than fifty years old. Some of them are showing their age, to be sure. But some of them have all the vigor of youth. Fifty years? Olentangy Church is just a kid!

For most of my life, including my adult life, I have felt too young to be taken seriously. There have always been older and wiser people around. I have always been a newcomer, a novice. But lately, as I edge toward fifty and more gray hairs show up, things have changed. Fifty years is long enough to have had real life experience, long enough to have been around the block more than once, long enough to have suffered, to have grown.

To reach fifty is no big deal these days. Most of us make it well beyond fifty. But fifty years for a marriage? That’s a big deal. And fifty years is a big deal for a church. Not because few churches make it to fifty; lots of churches do. But because fifty years is a milestone in the church’s story of God’s faithfulness. (We’re not to grandmother’s house yet, but the mile markers are going by.)

**At Gilgal, the Israelites set up a memorial to God’s faithfulness.** It had taken years, centuries, in fact. The road had been difficult, and long. Always there were stubborn, willful people to deal with, to work with. Always God’s purpose and authority were challenged. Always there were obstacles (seas, deserts, rivers) to overcome.

But God had made promises to Abraham, to Moses, and to the people Israel. Always there was the promise of the Land, a land that bore an uncanny resemblance to Paradise — in their dreams, at least — a land in which Abraham had lived and to which Abraham’s descendants had now, at last, returned. A group of priests were at the same time the first and the last into the land. They carried the Ark of the Covenant into the flooded Jordan River. On one side of them, the waters ceased. On the other side, the waters flowed away. The priests stood on dry ground, one foot in the old world, one in the new. Then the people followed quickly into and across the dry riverbed. At last, they were home. A home they had never seen. (A home other people were living in, to be sure. But that’s a story for another day.)

And twelve men each picked up a stone from the riverbed . . .

*I wonder if each one tried for the biggest stone he could carry —*

*not to prove his own strength,*

*but to claim a foundational pre-eminence for his own tribe.*

*I wonder.*

However large the stones were, they were clustered and arranged at Gilgal. From now on, those stones would trigger the telling of this story: how God had kept his promise, how a flooded river couldn’t stand in the way, how Joshua had led the people at these waters, just as Moses had led them at the waters of the Red Sea. The pile of twelve stones — never to be moved, not even by some slick real-estate developer — would prompt questions for generations to come. And each generation would tell the next generation the same story, the story of God’s faithfulness to Abraham and Israel.

**In a similar way, Holy Communion is a memorial to God’s faithfulness.** In Holy Communion, we share bread and wine — the body of Christ, the new covenant in his blood. The sacrament is a way to remember. A way to retell the story of Jesus the Savior. A way to enter into the story of God’s love for the world. A way to have our story taken into this story, to find its meaning there. The Scripture says, “In his light, we see light.” Similarly, in his story, we find our story, our genuine story.

The stones were to remain at Gilgal forever. We take bread and wine forever — “until [the Lord] comes,” the Apostle says. Through Moses, God told Israel, “Don’t ever forget how you came here!” The stones at Gilgal were set up to deliver Israel from covenantal Alzheimers. Always, always, always, they were to remember. Through the sacrament of bread and wine, taken again and again and again, we remember, we always remember, the story that comes first. We cannot remember that story too often. Because God’s faithfulness to us and to the world in Jesus Christ is the foundation of every other story that’s worth remembering, of every other story that’s worth telling, of every other story that’s worth living.

**Which brings us to our fiftieth anniversary story.** I’ve not noticed anyone around here too excited about this anniversary. That’s probably a good thing, a sign that we don’t take ourselves too seriously. And we shouldn’t. It may also be that fifty doesn’t seem very old. That we’re still young as a church. That we’re still small as a church. That we really aren’t all that much to reckon with.

My! Aren’t we humble?!

Oh, we do our part. We get a good turnout at BREAD events. A large portion of our giving goes outside these walls. We have people serving and volunteering all over the area — at food pantries, schools, government offices, prisons, and more. We gather for worship every Sunday. Some weeks nearly all of us are here — some weeks. We teach our children about God’s love through Jesus. We do our part. But it doesn’t really amount to much. Other churches give more. Other churches do more. Other churches are more. So why would we get excited about this anniversary?

Here’s why we might get a little bit excited, at least. God has been with us for some fifty years now. There are no signs that God intends to abandon us. God is, God remains, faithful. And every good thing happening around here — whether lately or ten, twenty, even forty years ago — is an expression of God’s faithfulness.

For fifty some years, God has been with us, teaching us through the Word, feeding us through the Holy Supper, forming us through Baptism, sustaining us from one generation to the next. Any part of our past worth telling, any part of our present worth celebrating, any part of our future worth hoping for — it’s all because of God’s faithfulness.

That’s what we’re celebrating this anniversary month. May we never forget!