

Stones and Rust

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 9

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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November 11, 2018

Joshua 4:1-7

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ²“Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³and 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.’” ⁴Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵Joshua 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, ⁶so that this

may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’⁷ 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.”

Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

If you are visiting today, or if you have not been present for this fall sermon series on the Art and Architecture of Faith, then let me assure you that today's bulletin cover is by far the ugliest in the series. It may be the ugliest bulletin cover in the history of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church! We have been examining the profound symbolism of some of our church's most beautiful and distinguished artistic features, but before the series comes to a close next Sunday, I thought we should have one practical sermon about Rust and Stones.

By the looks of our exterior windows in the Ministries Center and the Education building, you would think we have stored up treasure *where moth and rust consume*, but we know better than that. As a matter of fact, we have invested deeply in the program and outreach ministry of the church to the point that our buildings have come into a season of needing repair, renovation and revitalization. So after a several year strategic planning and consideration¹ of how our property serves our congregation's mission, we are in the midst of an ambitious and historic capital campaign as we approach the Church's 150th anniversary in 2023.

We have prioritized the much needed renovation of the Education building, and of making the whole campus more accessible, with our large and small gathering spaces better suited to our needs. A full ten percent of the campaign will be tithed to mission and outreach. To that end we have affirmed two goals: to raise \$17.5 million dollars, and to have the broad support of the congregation, giving every member an opportunity to be involved in a supportive role by prayer and by financial commitment. As a community, I think this second goal is more important than the first – giving each of us the opportunity to invest in the legacy of this historic church as we prepare for the future.

¹ *A Place for Worship, Praise and Celebration: The Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church Campus Now and for Generations to Come*. Presented to Session and Trustees, June, 2016; adopted by Session, October, 2016.

The history of this church reflects the history of the times. When it was founded in 1873, great moral and social changes were taking place as the country was emerging from the Civil War, and the Industrial Revolution was underway, including the expansion of the Railroads.

On Monday, January 13, 1873, the Philadelphia newspaper ran two stories on the front page – the death of Louis Napoleon, and the other front page story was entitled, “New Church Formed in Bryn Mawr.” Founded by sixteen members, 13 women and 3 men planted a church in this emerging town west of the city, on a tract of land that cost twenty-five hundred dollars.

At its Fiftieth anniversary, the church had outgrown the seating capacity of its first sanctuary; and in 1926 the Chair of the New Church Building Committee made this report: “Forty years ago, this church had a membership of 106 and they built a church with a seating capacity of 500.” Taking inspiration from the faith and confidence of that early, small church membership, he went on, “We now have a membership of 705, and the seating capacity of our new church will be over fourteen hundred.” He ended his remarks saying, “If we do not fulfill our obligations to the rising generation in the way that little church years ago fulfilled their obligation to our generation, the future of this church is problematic and the responsibility is ours.”²

In 1927 the cornerstone of our sanctuary was laid, to seat a congregation double in size of the church who laid it. Now it is our turn. We cannot continue to let rust consume our windows. We have treasure to store in the purposes of heaven. We have a responsibility to the children of our children to celebrate the past generations of women and men who gave us this beautiful facility where we are nurtured in faith. And we have a calling from God to take seriously the foundation we lay for the future.

² Hugh Best, *Spirit of a Century: 100 Years of the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church*.

Our Old Testament scripture reading testifies to this vital, forward thinking – act of remembrance. After forty years in the wilderness, the people of God are at last entering the Promised Land. This story – like the crossing of the Red Sea begins with a critical moment in which the tribes of Israelites encountered what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle. The mighty Jordan River – which in harvest season overflowed its banks, was a deadly impediment between the point where those Israelites were, and the land of plenty where they were destined to be.

The prudent thing in the face of such an obstacle would have been for them to turn back – to go back to familiar wilderness terrain, and to make their peace with it. But God’s will was for them to go forward, and so they did. God called on their new leader, and told Joshua how to lead them through. Right through the middle of that river, with walls of water on each side, the whole nation of Israel marched forward as if on dry ground.

Then, having crossed the Jordan, Joshua gave the order that twelve stones should be taken out of the middle of that river and assembled as a memorial. It was a ritual act of bearing witness to God’s ongoing redemptive activity in the midst of the people, the community of faith God was continuing to guide. And this is the explanation given by the text: So that, in time to come, when children would say, “What do these stones mean?” the story of that deliverance could be told again and again. The past would be remembered, so that in the face of new seemingly insurmountable obstacles the people would meet them with faith and courage.

Each new generation of believers crosses over on the stones laid by those who have gone before. The stones become the foundation of the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the faith we nurture, our outreach ministry to serve a world in need, the rituals we keep and the liturgy we impart so when our children ask us “What does this mean?” they can be inspired by the faith and courage of those who have come before us.

We need that faith and courage now to face the brutal realities of our time – with the escalating expressions of racism and anti-Semitism. We need

that faith and courage now to deal with the unbelievably senseless gun violence stalking innocent Americans. We need that faith and courage now to uphold the moral and social values of our Judeo-Christian heritage amid growing levels of distrust to find our path of service going forward. We are called to gather in this place, and hear the stories of God's love for the human family, of God making every human being in God's own image and likeness of every race and nation, of God's intentions for dividing walls to come down in Christ, of God's preference for the enslaved, the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized. It is in this place, that those stories are told and retold so that we may be emboldened to work for justice and peace, and to share the love of Christ in our community and our world.

My friend Ted Wardlaw is President of Austin seminary, and tells a story about visiting a supporter of the seminary in Houston. Ted's friend arranged for a special tour of his home church which had just completed a huge new sanctuary. St. Martin's is the largest Episcopal church in the country. It's the church where Barbara Bush's Memorial service took place last year. Ted remembers the tour was on a glorious fall day with bright sun shining through majestic stained glass windows; it was breathtaking, he said. But it was when he and his friend emerged from the building that he saw the most inspiring scene.

Standing near one of the new sanctuary's exterior walls was a stone-mason, with his family gathered around him, his wife and children, his parents and in-laws – over a dozen people in all. The stone-mason was proudly narrating his own role in the construction of the sanctuary, and pointing to a portion of the wall, the man said, “These are the stones I laid for this building,” while the beloved crowd around him nodded approvingly. As he shared how he had taken part in the construction of something grand and transcendent, a church that would span the ages, welcome generations of believers, and make a difference - not only in the lives of the congregants but also in their communities of service, Ted noticed unmistakable pride in his voice, “These are the stones I laid for this building.”³

³ Ted Wardlaw, *The Reed*, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Psalm 29 has a lovely line that says, “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” And we experience that holiness when we gather in this church’s Chapel and Sanctuary and in the classrooms across our campus where we engage in the rituals of remembering in order to face the complexities of our lives and of our world with faith and courage. The beauty of our church is not an add-on; it is a foundational witness to the wholeness and goodness of God’s love for us and for our world.

Old Testament scholar Jim Mays put it this way: “We are subconsciously moved by the need for a kind of ecstasy... the disclosure of the holy other we are not, the confrontation with One in whose aura of power we find possibilities not our own.”⁴

Friends, we have inherited this beautiful church campus, from people of vision and foresight, people of faith and hope, people who found in God possibilities not our own. They made deep investments and commitments to assure that we would have a place for rituals of remembering God’s mighty acts, for courage to face the current complexities of our time, and to trust that the future is in the hands of a good and powerful God.

In a month, on December 9th, we will dedicate our pledges to this campaign. It is our time, in this place to deal with the rust – and to become like stone-masons ourselves. To say with gratitude, humility and pride: these are the stones I laid for this building; this is part of the foundation I helped prepare for the future.

So that when our children ask us, “What do these stones mean?” we will have amazing stories to tell about the Mighty Acts of God to deliver a people from slavery, to lead a people into a land flowing with abundant life for all,

⁴ Jim Mays quoted by Eugene Peterson, “The Beauty of Holiness,” *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion*, no.29, p. 22.

to be God's people through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed.

AMEN.