

WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?

Joshua 4:1-7; May 3, 3015
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Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, come, that through your word we may be guided into a love for you, for each other, and for the whole world which you created. Amen.

At the National Archives building in Washington, D.C., where some of our national treasures are stored—a repository of sacred relics if ever there were such a repository — there is inscribed across the vast portico of that building these words: “The past is prologue.” The past is prologue!

Now, if you listen carefully these days, you can hear across the landscape of our culture a whole host of approaches toward the past. There is a popular approach toward the past that sees it all as irrelevant — as a dusty, mildewed era that is best forgotten, because what’s really important is what’s happening now! Why even study history?

And then, of course, there is the other end of the spectrum that holds up the past in reverential terms—that says that the past, generally considered, was just better than the present or the future; that our best days are behind us and not in front of us. It was the Mississippian William Faulkner, I believe, who uttered the classic line: “The past is not only not dead; it isn’t even past.”

So there are a number of ways in which we can approach the past, which is why I find it intriguing that at this national repository of the past, the claim made about the past is refreshingly tentative and modest. The claim is not that the past is sacred beyond the shadow of a doubt; not that the past is better, in spades, than the present or the future. Instead, that inscription across that portico inspires us and challenges us: “The past is prologue.”

I heard of a tourist in Washington that visited that building on one occasion and saw that inscription. He hailed a cab to take him to his next stop and asked the driver what the inscription meant. And the cabbie, who like many cabbies, had the gift of taking the esoteric and bringing it all down to ground level, said to the tourist, “It means, ‘you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet!’”

Here at Idlewild, as we begin the process of informing you about the exciting plans for a capital funds campaign that have been in the works for nearly 10 years, I’m thinking about that inscription: “The past is prologue.” And about that wonderful translation: “You ain’t seen nuthin’ yet.”

One of the greatest temptations we have here at Idlewild, I find myself included in this judgment, is to immerse ourselves in the spectacular heritage of this church. To spend all of our days and all of our energy writing checks off of all of Idlewild's heroic moments in the past!

For what I have found in listening to stories and reading and re-reading Perre Magness' book that was written for the 100th anniversary 25 years ago (which, incidentally she is rewriting and updating for our 125th celebration in November), one thing I have found is that courageous and progressive leadership in the past goes past the days of Jim Lowry, when he led this church to build Idlewild Court, the first transitional home for the homeless; beyond the days of Henry Strock in the 70s when he brought in the first woman, Louise Upchurch (Johnson) to be ordained in the Memphis presbytery; It predates the days when Paul Tutor Jones and John Johnson marched with the sanitation workers and led the congregation in declaring even earlier that all of God's children could worship here. If they couldn't, Dr. Jones said, this would no longer be called a church.

That leadership even preceded T.K. Young's courage in the 30s and 40s as he led not only Idlewild, but the entire southern Presbyterian Church to try to put the Civil War behind them and work for the reunion of the northern and southern Presbyterian churches. It failed in the early 50s, largely because of racial issues and fear of the southern church becoming too "liberal," and he died a few months later.

No, that visionary and courageous leadership was evident in 1921, when a small but growing Idlewild on the corner of McLean and Union began discussions about moving two blocks away and building this incredible edifice. Today, 94 years later, it would seem to have been a no brainer, but they had only been there 20 years, so let me read a portion of Perre's book from that era:

"The new plans were not accepted without controversy...After a long struggle between conflicting views of members and officers, relating to the site on which the new church would be built, not necessary to be set out, the congregation finally ordered that the trustees purchase [the appropriate] lots."

And it was done, "after being softened up at a dinner," she writes, "with Chicken a la king, asparagus, Parisienne potatoes, tomato surprise, bisque ice cream, chocolate cake, demitasse and mints."

But what I found most compelling was a comment from a later campaign brochure:

"This was the turning point for Idlewild Presbyterian Church. It might have remained a small suburban church for all time, but its forward thinking and progressive membership decided that our location was strategic, that our responsibility to our own community was great, and that our opportunity for service was unparalleled in the city of Memphis." (p. 28-29)

“The past is prologue.” It is prologue to the present. Thanks to the sturdy foundation bequeathed to us by a glorious past, this church is an exciting and vital and growing and splendid community here in the present! People come from all over this metro area, including three states, for a thousand reasons. I marvel at the commitment of the members of this church, driving past at least a dozen other churches, some of you.

And yet you come — hundreds every week. You come to give of yourselves generously — to give of your time, teaching other people’s children, singing in the choir, serving in various leadership areas, and doing a host of other things. You come because of this church’s commitment to outreach—More than a Meal, tutoring at Idlewild school, backpacks at Brewster school, McMerton Gardens, Clean Water in Ghana and Mexico, church partnership in Cuba, and so much more. And you come because of this church’s growing commitment, as well, to in-reach and nurture, the kaleidoscope of learning opportunities, the renewed emphasis on caregivers and caregiving, the desire to be a welcoming congregation. If the past is prologue to the present, it is certainly prologue to an exciting present!

But is the past a prologue to the future? That’s up to us to decide. And we can take a page, I think from the Book of Joshua — that wonderful epic tale of how those wandering children of Israel conquered and occupied the Promised Land. There is a critical moment in which the throngs of those Israelites encountered what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle. It was the Jordan River — mighty enough in that harvest season to have overflowed its banks, and flowing swiftly as a frightening and 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 the terrain of the familiar, the status quo, and to make their peace with it. But God’s will was for them to go forward, and so they did; and God made for them a way out of no way. 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 — as a witness to God’s ongoing redemptive activity in the midst of that people. So that, in times to come, when children would say, “What do these stones mean?” the story of that deliverance could be recalled, and the past could be remembered, and they could move on with confidence and courage toward their destiny that God was calling them to. The past was prologue to the future!

The same fears and questions that those Israelites had about the future, are many of the same fears and questions that our forebears had in 1921 when they first began to envision a new and challenging future for this church. They asked “What will these stones mean?” And the answer helped make us who we are today.

And today, 2015, we are faced, in a way, with the same fears and questions that leaders had to answer: people like Walker Wellford (the original Walker Wellford, the First!), E.B. LeMaster (the first!), James Davant (the grandfather of Davant Latham and great-grandfather of Peggy McClure), George Tayloe (Jay Tayloe's great-grandfather). Can't you just picture the parking lot conversations (if they had parking lots back then!)? "Do we want to burden our future generations with a huge building like that?" "We can't afford it!" "Let's just have two or three services rather than building a bigger sanctuary." "Our money should go to outreach, and not bricks and mortar."

Good questions, one and all: the controversy was deep; but let me answer with a question. (After all, Idlewild is a place where questions are as important as the answers!) *Are we doing for those who follow us, what those whom we followed, did for us?* It's our time. Can we summon the same vision, the same foresight, and yes, the same courage that our forebears summoned?

It's easy to take these stones for granted, but after studying our building and our space needs for the past 10 years, we have discovered that there are many things we must do to insure the long-term relevance of Idlewild to our members and to the greater community, and one of them is to be sure that our facilities are capable of allowing us to glorify God in the best possible manner — in worship, education, fellowship, evangelism, recreation, and outreach. *Currently, they are not!*

A visitor comes here, looks around, and doesn't know which building to enter. She enters, and the first thing she encounters in either building are stairs. Not real welcoming first impression. An older man with a cane (and this has happened time and time again) comes for a funeral. "Could you tell me where the men's bathroom is?" "Well, you go up these stairs..."

Or someone in a wheelchair wants to come to a Sunday school class. It's over in the Jones Building. They turn around and leave because there isn't a way to get there in a wheelchair. *This church is living in sin* when we have a building that is not fully handicapped accessible... in 2015.

Have any of you tried to come into the kitchen on a Thursday evening at about 5:00? Not many of you have, because you couldn't fit in there with the kitchen staff and volunteers serving 125–150 meals in an antiquated, tiny kitchen. And this doesn't even mention a Jones Building that does not meet code for any new programs for children and parents that we might engage in.

I could go on and on, but you'll have a chance to hear more and see the plans in our neighborhood groups that will be beginning today and continuing through the month of May. If you haven't heard from us, you will, and it is imperative that all respond to these neighborhood groups to hear more. I believe, and believe strongly, that it will enable us to face the future with that confidence and trust that they had in 1921. Like them, we don't have all the answers as to what kind of programs — in-reach and outreach — God has in store for us over the next 25 years, but we need to be prepared!

Friends, I want to be the pastor of a church which is not afraid of considering its splendid past and exciting present, and thus inspired, the using its imagination to dream big dreams about what God might have in store for us next.

I want to be the pastor of a church that is excited enough about its own life and mission that its people are not ashamed to share that excitement in the places in which they work and on the streets in which they live, and to boldly invite others here, and to do it often.

I want to be the pastor of a church that is even **more** welcoming, **more** serving, doing **more** celebrating, engaging in **more** learning, and is even **more** caring.

On a regular basis, people from all walks of life , come here and ask in their own ways, “What do these stones mean?” And we tell them stories. And somehow, within those stories — which are our fumbling attempts to make sense of what these stones mean—there runs the common thread of God’s story. The story of that same God who blew open a path through the water and delivered those Israelites. The God who still delivers and still redeems and still cares mightily about us piling up stones for people to look at and thus remember that ongoing drama of deliverance.

So, as we kick off our campaign and celebrate this year our 125th anniversary, we will recall that river of baptismal water which also bears the breath of God and through which we, too have passed. So that we, too, by the grace of God, will encounter once again who and Whose we are, and what we’re baptized from and what we’re baptized for, and will move forward with confidence to become the people that we are meant to be!

Or to put it another way: The past is prologue, and you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet!

Amen.

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