

CMCL
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Susan Gascho-Cooke

Today's passage in Joshua is a beautiful and terrible one. The symmetry is beautiful: Here we are, at the end of the 40 years of wandering for the Hebrew people. Here we are, once again facing a river between a people and their destiny. Here we are, once again, ushered through in a miracle of water swept up and swept aside, a wall of water that leaves a dry path for the people to cross a river, and not even get wet. I'll be honest, I've read this passage before – and I either never noticed, or managed to forget, about this second spectacular river crossing. I did not remember that the wandering in the wilderness both began and ended with such a crossing. They left their bondage and slavery this way, and they enter their promised freedom the same way. Why do we have these two stories of parted waters? Of crossing through a boundary of water without getting wet?

There is beauty to having one's passage protected like this: that the very forces of nature would stand aside to allow your passage. Not only are you delivered across a border, but you arrive completely untouched. I think of the many people in our world today, crossing over treacherous waters to leave violence in the hope of entering a land where freedom and abundance will be their portion: crossing the Rio Grande, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the thousands (yes plural) who have died this year so far: no twin walls of water summoned to ensure their passage. Is their plight no less perilous than the Hebrews? Are their lives no less worthy in God's sight?

There is terrible in this story, too – the unabashed entitlement these writers felt, that God intended them to have power over the land so completely that their prayer was not for hospitality in a stranger land, but to remove their would-be hosts. From subdued to subjugators, they felt God's calling and blessing on that terrible reversal. They were unashamed to record their history this way, much as our U.S. history textbooks have done. Why would we choose a story for Pastoral Team Sunday that includes references to the "cleansing" of Canaan? Wasn't this supposed to be a warm-fuzzy Sunday?? Well, yes, there's supposed to be warm-fuzzy today. But this passage also underlines the *power of community* and the reasons why it is so very essential that community is done with integrity and intention.

The Hebrews carried the Ark of the Covenant with them, through all their wandering, and they carried it out ahead of them as they crossed the Jordan into freedom, in today's passage. This is what all that wandering was supposed to be about; preparing them for this freedom they will have. Wisdom knew that they needed time between Egypt and Canaan. So they made, in some ways, a contemplative move: to withdraw from the life they'd known, stay only to themselves to focus on the stories of communal identity, learn to rely on God (manna) develop daily patterns for following God (the

pillars of cloud and flame) and cherishing that which is most important. All were practices built into the daily life of the 40-year wandering.

You give power to what you choose to carry – what you choose to repeat, over and over again, to yourself, to your children, to one another. There is power in the stories you tell, the interpretations you discern. The objects you choose to cherish and pass on. I think this may be what was being talked about in Matthew 18: what is bound on earth will be bound in heaven, and what is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven; for there is the very power and presence of God when two or more are gathered.

This is why it is so important that we talk amongst ourselves here in THIS community – Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster about what it is that we choose to carry – our sacred symbols and sacred stories, and to discern in humility and honesty how our stories are shaping us to be God’s people in the world. The children of Israel were supposed to be shaping themselves to be such a people. In Joshua, they are our cautionary tale – our encouragement to look at what we carry and why and humbly realize how easily you can go off-script. How do we stay in community? How do we keep our community responsive to God, the Living God, not the one of our making who justifies us, and how do we cultivate responsiveness to, and honesty with, one another?? Our Pastoral Team – our priests who help us by going out ahead, really looking, who help preserve our community’s most sacred symbols and objects and stories.

We are bringing to you today various perspectives on how we see this community; the objects that feel central and sacred to us; in hopes that it will help us through our times of transition; that it will prompt *all* of our/your thinking about what our ark might hold; what it might be missing. I did not bring an object for our ark, but I will close with this story. This week I visited the Mennonite Information Center’s Tabernacle exhibit where they display a replica of the ark and the tabernacle. One of those stories our guide shared was from the Jewish Talmud which says that the children of Israel kept in the ark not just the Stone Tables of the 10 Commandments, as the Christian canon records, but also the first set of commandments, still broken. The two sets of tablets in the Ark offer a striking metaphor. Namely, that brokenness and wholeness coexist side-by-side, even in [the] holiest spots – in the heart of the holy Ark.

The 16th century Kabbalistic work, *Reshit Chochmah*, teaches that the Ark is a symbol of the human heart. People experience brokenness in many ways... .. we know that we “forever carry ‘broken tablets’”. The image of the broken tablets, unfortunately, offers an accurate representation of our lives and the life of the world around us. We carry our broken tablets with us always. After a painful loss, life continues, but now differently than before. We move through life now with two sets of tablets. ... They are encased in the same box; in the same heart. The commentator Rashi says that the two sets of tablets, the broken and the whole sets, sit touching one another. The Chassidic Rebbe, Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said. “There is nothing more whole than a broken

heart.” What does this enigmatic statement mean? The heart can be patched after one confronts [their] brokenness and acknowledges [their] vulnerability. ... God cradles the broken tablets side by side with the whole ones in the holiest place[s] in our tradition. The symbol of the broken tablets serves as a poignant reminder of our sacred responsibility to be ever sensitive to those who suffer and to reach out and be understanding and embracing of those who live with ‘broken tablets’ in their hearts. Moses picks up each precious piece of the tablets, he collects every shard, and he lovingly places every piece in the holy Ark, conveying a message that guides the Jewish heart for all time. What is in the heart of our community? What are the commandments – broken or whole – that you expect us to hold here? What are the sacred objects or stories for you here, or that you long for here?

Communion

This morning in our celebration of communion, we focus on Jesus’ request, made during the Last Supper with his disciples, to remember him. “My body will be broken – yours may be, too,” he said. “My life I pour out for in, in my life and my death. So, please remember me. Remember my brokenness.” Jesus asked them to bear witness, to walk with him. As he so often said: “The last shall be first and the first last.” In communion, we remember that that which is whole may need to be broken, and that which is broken will indeed be made whole. And so, we remember Jesus today, in the breaking and sharing of bread in communion. Jesus, we remember you in the breaking of this bread. We bear witness to your life and death. Jesus, we remember you in the pouring of this juice. We join with you in the new covenant you lived and taught. So come, the feast is prepared.