

**Upon This Rock:
Stones of Crossing**

Joshua 4:20-24

In all the passages of life, God is with us.

A sermon preached by
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Pastor Dan Benuska told a story about a friend of his named Wayne who got an unusual job to supplement his income while he went to college. He got a job in a rope factory. This factory made huge ropes, called hawsers, the kind of ropes used to hold ships in dock. Wayne was put on a machine that took the individual strands of rope and wove them together into a big, thick rope. Wayne's job was to feed the strands into the machine, then to go around and catch the big rope as it came out of the machine and coil it up on the floor.

The first day on the job, the man at the next machine said, "You got a rock in your pocket?"

Wayne answered, "What?"

"You got a rock in your pocket?" the man said again.

Not wanting to appear dumb, Wayne mumbled, "Oh, yeah, sure."

He found that it was easy to feed the strands into one side of the machine, but when the huge rope came out the other side, it came with such force that it swept Wayne up off his feet and sent him crashing to the floor. Then he knew what the fellow meant by a rock in his pocket!¹

Isn't that the way life treats us sometimes? It comes at us with such force that if we don't have something to hold us steady, we will end up on our backside and embarrassed. That's the purpose of this sermon series, "Upon This Rock." We want to give you some rocks in your pocket, some weights to hold you steady in the midst of your challenges. We want to give you some Scriptural anchors in the storm so your boat will stay afloat. These are crazy, challenging times, and we need some rocks in our pocket.

Today's rock comes from the story of Joshua. Joshua was one of the lieutenants of Moses, one of the leaders of the Israelites. He became the successor to Moses after Moses died. After 40 years wandering in the wilderness, Moses died on Mount Nebo, just across the Dead Sea from the land of Canaan. He could see it, but he couldn't go in. Joshua became the new Moses—no pressure! Job number one for Joshua was to take the people in to the land God had promised, and that involved crossing the Jordan River.

At many places, the Jordan is no bigger than a good-sized creek. But when the Israelites came to cross, it was the springtime, and the river was

swollen outside of its banks by the spring rains. Last year when we went to the Holy Land, they had just had the largest rainfall event they had experienced in 30 years in Galilee. Everywhere you looked, water was flowing. When we crossed a bridge over the Jordan River, it was a raging torrent. That must have been how it was for Joshua's crossing.

The people of Israel had camped on the east side of the Jordan, and Joshua gave instructions that when they saw the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant—the gold-covered box containing the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments—they were to follow at a distance. So Joshua commanded the priests, and they lifted the ark and began to carry it into the Jordan River. When their feet touched the water, an amazing thing happened. The water parted. The river flowing downstream flowed out to the south, and the water coming down from the north stopped flowing. It backed up for miles upstream. And the people of the Israelites, thousands of them, walked across on dry ground where the river had been.

The parallel with the crossing of the Red Sea as the Israelites left Egypt is intentional. At the beginning and the end of the journey, God brought them through the water and gave them safe passage to the other side.

When the people had crossed over, the priests with the ark were still standing in the river bed. Joshua commanded them to take 12 stones from the river bed, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. They were to bring them up on the west side of the Jordan and set them in a circle to commemorate the powerful act of God they had seen that day. We think they were in a circle because they called the place Gilgal, which means “circle” in Hebrew.

When the men had taken the stones out of the river, the priests bearing the ark began to come out of the dry riverbed. When their feet touched the bank, the water that had been held back by the power of God was released, and the Jordan River was in flood stage again. When they got the stones set up, Joshua led worship, and he said, “*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.”*² This was a great reminder that God is powerful, and that through all the passages they had been through—liberation from slavery, 40 years in the wilderness, crossing the Jordan—God was with them—and would always be.

In all the passages of life, God is with us. And we all have passages, don't we? One after another, they keep coming. Most of us are lucky enough to have a fairly uneventful childhood, but then we all hit the teenage years. Those are not easy years to live through. Then you leave home for college or the military or work. Maybe you go through the passage of higher education. Then there's marriage, and if you're fortunate, parenthood. You may have a career, and that career may require moving around or re-training periodically. All are passages to deal with. Then there are the hard passages: divorce, disease, or grief threaten to knock you over. And as a community, we may experience war, economic depression, or God forbid, a pandemic, right? Life is pretty much one passage, one crossing, after another, isn't it? How do we cope? How do we keep a rock in our pocket that will hold us steady?

God is with us in all the passages of life, and there are good, solid stones we can set up to remind us of God's power and presence and to keep us grounded. I don't have time to give you 12 stones to set up today, but I will give you four.

Set up the stone of faith. You are not alone. God is with you. You don't ever have to make the crossing or fight the battles by yourself. If you have faith, you have a relationship with the God who made you and loves you and will not let you go. Hebrews 11:1 says, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”³ There is a reality beyond our physical reality. There is a God beyond our physical senses. That God is the Master of the universe, and if we put our faith in God, we can traverse any crossing in our lives.

Set up the stone of grace. With all the things you have to navigate in life, there are going to be some mistakes. You are going to mess up and go astray and get lost on the way. But our God is a God of grace and

forgiveness, and God will always let you get back on track when you need to.

Paul was dealing with a physical problem of some sort, but the words he said apply to every crossing: *“To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”*⁴ God’s grace is sufficient in all the passages of life. So accept God’s grace offered to you, and give yourself some grace when the crossing is hard.

The third stone to set up is courage. When the passage is challenging, you can’t back down. You just have to have courage. Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the will to do the right thing in spite of your fear. After Moses died, and Joshua took command of the Israelites, I’m sure he was scared. How could he fill the shoes of Moses? But the first word the Lord said to Joshua was a word of encouragement: *“Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you. ...I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”*⁵ Set up the stone of courage, and you will remember where your strength comes from.

The last stone is hope. If there is one thing that gets us through the day in our difficult passages of life, it is hope. We have to have hope. We have to believe a better day is coming. If we lose hope, we submit to despair, paralysis, and failure. Andy Crouch, writing about Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, said, “Human beings can live for forty days without food, four days without water, and four minutes without air. But we cannot live for four seconds without hope.”⁶

Paul gives us a summary of these four stones in Romans, chapter 5: *“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."⁷ Those are such great words!

Faith, Grace, Courage, Hope: these stones will get you where you need to go, through any passage, over any mountain, across any river that stands between you and the promised land.

Tod Bolsinger, one of the presenters at our Future Church Summit last weekend, wrote a book called *Canoeing The Mountains: Christian Leadership In Uncharted Territory*.⁸ The book is based on the story of the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark into the uncharted territory of the Louisiana Purchase in 1804. They were seeking the fabled Northwest Passage which would take them by water from the Mississippi River up the Missouri River and eventually to the Pacific Ocean. When they got to the headwaters of the Missouri River, they hiked up the mountain at Lemhi Pass in Idaho, expecting to see a river on the other side heading westward to the Pacific. But all they saw were more mountains. So they left the canoes behind, got horses from the indigenous tribes in the area, and navigated the mountains until they found another river and could rebuild their canoes.

Eventually Lewis and Clark did reach the Pacific, just not as they had intended. Nevertheless, they reached their goal, their promised land. But they had to leave the canoes behind. They had to learn, adapt, and change strategy along the way.

The Israelites stood at the flood of the Jordan after wandering for forty years in the wilderness. The Promised Land lay before them. So they stepped into the flood and claimed a new future, a new promise, a new land. They marked their passage with stones.

Jesus marked his passage, not with stones, but with bread and wine. On the night before he died, he looked out over new territory—a cross, his own death, and resurrection. These three days would be the passage that defined the salvation of the planet. This was the hinge point of history. So he took bread and said, "This is my body." He took a cup and said, "This is my

blood.” Maybe this was not the way Jesus had hoped it would turn out. Certainly it was not what the disciples had hoped for. But their last meal together was a reminder that whatever happened, Jesus would always be with them. The passage was difficult, but when they came out on the other side of Easter, the disciples of Jesus claimed a new future, a new promise, a new mission, and they changed the world.

Here we are now in 2021. At least 2020 is behind us; for the first time in a long time, the future is looking brighter. We are ready to claim a new future, to believe a new promise, to live in a new post-pandemic land. We may have to leave the canoes of the past behind, because the new world will be different. Some things have changed forever. The old maps won't get us where we need to go. But in this passage, too, we have the assurance: God is with us. In *all* the passages of life, God is with us. There's a rock for your pocket!

¹ William O. Reeves, “A Hidden Glory,” (sermon), February 9, 1997. No source given.

² Joshua 4:21-24.

³ Hebrews 11:1.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10.

⁵ Joshua 1:6-7, 9.

⁶ Andy Crouch, “The Gospel of Steve Jobs,” *Christianity Today*, January 21, 2011.

⁷ Romans 5:1-5.

⁸ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing The Mountains: Christian Leadership In Uncharted Territory* (IVP Books, 2015).