

Miracle Markers
Joshua 4:1-9

If you have ever been to the Rocky Mountain Conference UCC's camp La Foret – or any camp for that matter – you may have noticed the engravings that seem natural in such a setting ... or to picnic areas, or college campuses, or ... well many places. The markings I refer to might read something like, "Jane wuz here, '99".

Fill in any name or year you like, male or female, going back decades. This is not a recent phenomenon, no matter how original each generation thinks ourselves.

But who is this Jane who "wuz" here? Apparently she is someone who felt it important to commemorate her presence at camp in 1999.

Sure, we can speculate about her – was she a camper or a chaperone? I would think that an adult might have soaked in some of our cultural mores that tell us it's inappropriate to scar furniture in such a fashion ...

but really, might it be possible for her to have had such an experience in that place, in that time, that perhaps she felt the urge – nay, the NEED to permanently express her presence?

She might have found a different means of doing so, but she marked the event.

Could it be that a divine encounter among the people she met there and the beauty of creation surrounding her, might have marked HER, as well?

Powerful experiences compel us seek permanent reminders.

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In the passages prior to today's excerpt from Joshua, the people of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years – biblical shorthand for a very long time.

They had traveled with no real home until they finally reached the Jordan River;

the river that separated them from the land promised to their ancestors Sarah and Abraham.

Here, God makes a way for the people to cross – a miracle like they hadn't seen since the parting of the Reed Sea. God makes a way for them to enter their new home.

What relief.           What joy.           What thanksgiving.

And what response?   They marked their passing.

With their hands and with the stones God provided,  
the people of God built a permanent reminder of this moment;  
each tribe taking a stone from the center of the river they crossed –  
marching back where their feet and the feet of a nation had already passed,  
choosing their gift and setting it together with each other tribe's offering.

The result was a marker, as Joshua tells the people,

"so 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":

God was present, and he revealed his presence in this place!

"So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever"<sup>1</sup>.

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But these 12 stones placed as a reminder –

the ones the author tells us "are there to this day" –

will I find them if I go searching the Jordan?

Is the original marking of this event still available for my searching eyes and spirit,  
 so hopeful of a reminder of God's presence? ...Does it matter?  
 Because the noting of that moment lasted for the people of God –  
 and the memory lives still ... or we wouldn't have this story today.

*Powerful experiences compel us to seek permanent reminders.*

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Now, I am not saying that I condone the fictional Jane's action of carving her name into a bunk – far from it!
 But I am recognizing her human need to mark a special time and place, perhaps for herself, perhaps for
 others to acknowledge it later.
 Jane wuz here.

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There are several biblical examples of people building reminders of particularly powerful moments.

In Genesis there is the story of Jacob,  
 traveling light so that one night he uses a stone for his pillow.  
 He dreams of angels, and then God's self appears and reminds Jacob of the covenant made with his ancestors,  
 and thus with Jacob as well.

The story continues, "So Jacob rose early in the morning,  
 and he took the stone that he had put under his head  
 and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on top of it.  
 He called that place Bethel...[and he said,]  
 'this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house;  
 and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you'".<sup>2</sup>

The name Bethel and that anointed stone pillar are markers of Jacob's encounter with God;  
 signposts of praise and thanksgiving;  
 a landmark to all who passed that this place was special;  
 a reminder of God's presence and miracles to any who heard the name:  
 Beth-el, House of God.

Jacob had created a dwelling place for this experience of the Holy.

The disciples followed the same tradition, desiring to build where they experienced the miraculous.

Recall Jesus on a mountain,  
 Peter, James and John standing by as he is transfigured into a shining being of light;  
 Moses and Elijah appearing beside him.  
 All the disciples can think to do is to build dwellings for them,  
 to mark the moment and honor their presence<sup>3</sup>.

Marking the miracles in this way is like writing in stone, "God wuz here".

It may not seem like much, not at all, and of course you may not remain in that place always – but it is something  
 powerful.

Something for you to remember the moment.  
 Something for others to see and wonder at.  
 God wuz here.

I call them Miracle Markers, this morning.

They mark not only the presence and passing of the people of God –  
 those open to experiencing the amazing and unexpected –

nor do they only mark God's presence made known in a particular time and place –  
because God is everywhere always –

but these miracle markers are SIGNS of memory and hope to people who will also pass by that way, note the marker, and possibly be moved by it.

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Many of you may not be too surprised to learn that when I enter a new town, when I'm traveling or just going from point A to point B, the first things I notice are the houses of worship. Jamie has gotten used to me saying,
“slow down, I want to read what kind of church that is”, or
“what type of synagogue do you think that was?”

One day while living in New Haven I went hiking with a friend.
Of course CT hiking is nothing like it is here, so we weren't that far up when we were finally overlooking the city.
We had trouble locating ourselves until I spotted a familiar landmark.

There below us was Redeemer UCC –
my friend had latched onto another church,
and we laughed when we noted our
coordinated method of orienting ourselves.

We started pointing out all the churches we could find, naming them along the way.

This may be a particular quirk of clergy, but I know a number of lay-folk who do the same thing. *Churches are significant signposts in our lives.* Buildings are an ancient and familiar way of coming to know God is in a place.

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Not everyone experiences the urge to carve in wood or build up stone.  
Rather, some people memorialize their experiences of God  
in the *written word* – you may be familiar with one such example ... we read from it each time we gather here.  
These words from people who lived so long ago  
remain for us as signposts of their passing this way,  
of their searching for God,  
recognizing his presence and memorializing it.  
They left us many markers that gift us with hope to continue the journey.

Other people may be moved to commemorate a miracle in song.  
Reformed slave trader John Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace”  
as an autobiographical reflection on his conversion.  
The lyrics are of one man's life-altering experience,  
but they remain a living reminder –  
one of the best known hymns today –  
and a beloved marker that expresses the faith of many of *us* as well.

Would we survive as people of God without this hymn?      We absolutely would.  
Are we made better for its continued presence with us?      Perhaps.  
Does it point to God's presence in our lives today as it did for those past and for he who wrote it? Will it do the same for future generations? Yes.

Not for everyone –  
as no symbol or experience touches everyone the same way –  
but for many that song will stand as a miracle marker.

People past, God in that place;  
people present, God in this place;  
people future, God there also.

It is not only those stone pillars built up by Joshua and Jacob  
that stand as testaments of hope to we who follow,  
but the markers we build also praise God here and now and  
reach out in hope to strangers and to future generations.  
Through our efforts we join the long line of faithful followers who  
give hope to travelers:

“See, God is in this place!

We have met her here and taken her with us into the world.

*You* may also know her!

Perhaps here in this church or elsewhere,  
but you may know her - because she lives!

You know God lives because we remember her here”.

Let us build this roadside shrine, this house of God,  
not to enclose him in these walls,  
but to shout hope to those who are wandering,  
to those who need his healing and welcome,  
to those who seek and long for knowledge of his presence.

Why are such markers necessary?

Look to Jacob, and Joshua and to Peter, James and John.

These are NOT just piles of stones,

not just dwelling places,

not just buildings,

*but miracle markers!*

Places where we remember God’s presence in our lives.

Yes, God is revealed in the living stones that are our beings and actions,  
and when we are gone what we have left behind will  
bear witness to our faith and the knowledge that  
God has touched our lives through each other,  
within these walls and out in the world.

When your children ask you *what these stones mean to you*, you can say:

“A miracle happened here, many times!

I met God in this place and I took knowledge of his presence everywhere I went.

Others came and knew her too, and they still come,  
finding hope that they did not know existed!

God wuz here.”

God *is* in this place – in you, in the stone ... God is everywhere. Until the end of time.  
May we always mark his miracles- for the hope of all Creation. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Joshua 4:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:18-22.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36.