

# REMEMBER!

## *A YEAR-END CELEBRATION*

*Joshua 24*

*June 29-30, 2019 —Pastor Mark Toone—Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church*

I got the craziest email this last week. Way back in the 70s, I taught a Karate class to grade school kids. One of those “kids” named Steve...who is now 56 years old... tracked me down and sent a long note reminiscing about that class. He wrote, **“I....never forgot those rough and tumble days in your class. It was quite a brutal experience! You were not easy on us, but I suppose that was a part of the lesson.”** He went on for a while, describing the crazy things we did, thanked me for my influence, and then closed with these words: **“[I] just wanted to tell you, those days are not forgotten.”**

I can't tell you the delight I felt hearing this voice from 50 years past! I was smiling about the rest of the week. My wife Cyndi tells me that I can be so forward-looking that sometimes I fail to stop and just celebrate the past. Steve reminded me of the value of remembering.

Joshua learned this lesson too. After 40 years of following Moses in the wilderness, Joshua was appointed to lead the people across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land...in a spectacular way. The priests were told to pick up the Ark of the Covenant and carry it into the Jordan River. (The Ark was like a golden treasure chest that represented the presence of God.) The moment they stepped into the Jordan... the waters parted! Just like the Red Sea had done 40 years earlier. As the priests stood there holding the ark, the people crossed over on dry land into the Canaan. Listen to what happened next: (Joshua 4 selected verses)

**When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua.... “Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.”**

**...And Joshua set up twelve stones [at Gilgal]....and he said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea...so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”**

How many have seen this cornerstone on our sanctuary? **“When your children ask you, say to them, “These stones shall be to the Lord a memorial forever.”** As the walls of this sanctuary went up in 1996, they were more than building blocks to us. We saw them as memorial stones...that would tell a story long after we were gone. A story of how God had grown this little congregation and allowed us to build a facility that not only

served our needs and the community...but more importantly, honored God. For generations to come. So we chose for our cornerstone Joshua 4. **Even as the people of Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land, God wanted them to remember all he had done to bring them this far.**

This is the last day of our program and fiscal year. Tomorrow, we launch 2020. Before we do, I want to pause for one last backward glance at the amazing things God did. This has been a year of growth; some of it record-setting. And it deserves to be remembered. So I want to build my own cairn of remembrance stones to acknowledge five areas. You can take your insert and jot these down on the "Looking forward" side. **But before I share MY five, I wonder...what do YOU remember from last year that deserves to be celebrated? Would you call it out?**

OK...here are mine. Remembrance Stone 1. HOLD IT- Celebrate Recovery. Celebrate Recovery is a ministry that encourages people to get honest about the "hurts, habits and hang-ups" that prevent them from thriving as God intended. You have heard right here some amazing stories of life-change that occur in C.R., so you might be surprised to discover that we are one of the few churches in our denomination to offer this program.

But at Chapel Hill we know that even Christians are broken, and CR has been a wonderful tool for rebuilding people from every walk of life. We come alongside the lost, the hurt, the broken-hearted and God is using CR to restore hope and joy and purpose to more people than ever before. **Last year we saw a 22% increase in attendance at CR.** That deserves to be remembered and celebrated. PLACE STONE.

Remembrance stone number 2-Baptisms. HOLD Last year we did something that might cause our Presbyterian forefathers to spin in their graves: **we brought a dunk tank into our sanctuary.** PIC Not because we don't think that sprinkling works. But because we believe that, for some, the opportunity to be immersed helps them experience what Paul described as being buried with Christ in baptism"... and raised up to new life.

On Christmas Eve, we invited 4000 people to come back and be baptized....and some did! On Easter, we got crazier. At the end of the Easter sermon... with over 3000 in attendance....we offered the chance for people to raise their hands and receive Jesus. On Easter! And we invited **them** to come back the next week and be baptized. And some did.

Bottom line: we had more than 80 professions of faith and nearly 50 adult baptisms. We are even considering...brace yourself...buying our OWN baptismal pool instead of borrowing one from the Nazarenes every time. Anyhow...2019 was a year of baptisms and that deserves to be remembered and celebrated. PLACE STONE.

Remembrance stone number 3-Alpha. Two years ago, we decided to join over 27 million others around the world who experience Alpha. Alpha provides a safe place for people to ask questions about God and life. People gather around a meal, watch a video, and then discuss that topic under the guidance of a host. Some professed faith in Jesus for the first

time. Many shared a profound encounter with the Holy Spirit. **Last year, over 350 people attended Alpha bringing the total graduates to nearly 600.** Not only have you all been introduced to Alpha, more importantly, you are starting to bring your un-churched friends. Alpha has become one of our most important ways of sharing the good news of Jesus with those who do not know him. 600 souls! That deserves to be remembered and celebrated. PLACE STONE

Remembrance stone number 4 HOLD-Chapel Hill Port Orchard. 2019 was the year we announced the launch of our first church plant. The first of many, we hope. You've heard a lot about it; you will hear more. But we cannot emphasize enough how important a moment this is in the life of our church. Less than 1% of all churches ever play a part in planting another church. **At the present rate of church closures in the US, we need a 10% increase in church-plants every year just to keep up! We want to do our part.**

We are convinced God has called us to move beyond these walls and plant a new church in Port Orchard. And we believe our own Pastor Megan is the right person to lead that charge. (And by the way, did you realize that Megan will be the first woman lead pastor church-planter in our denomination! Ever!)

Already, we have hosted two Port Orchard Alphas and are in the middle of our first youth Alpha in a local coffee shop. We had a public gathering of worship with 150 present, singing and praying for revival. We have a team searching for a building. And...we expect to give birth to our first brand new bouncing baby church on Easter Sunday, 2020. That deserves to be remembered and celebrated! PLACE STONE.

And the final stone of remembrance HOLD-Worship Attendance Growth. You may not know this, but we had been in an almost uninterrupted decline in our weekend worship attendance for more than 10 years. We are fighting some strong cultural headwinds. All across the country church attendance is declining. But that offered no comfort as we found ourselves dropping below 1000 some weekends, down from an average of nearly 1700 12 years ago. In conversation with one consultant, we were told that, for a church of our size, with a pastor my age (I loved THAT)... a reversal in declining worship attendance numbers is "almost unheard of."

Well, last year, the "unheard of" happened. We began to grow again. And not just a little. We saw our weekend worship increase by an average of about 20%. About 200 more people on average per weekend are attending our worship services compared to a year ago. And by the way, if you are one of those 200, may I just say how grateful we are that you have become a part of our family! You are literally the answer to our prayers!

But such growth is so unusual for a larger church that it caught the attention of a national publication. A reporter called to find out what "we were doing" to cause this turnaround. I'll share my answer to that question in a moment...but a 20% growth in weekend worship attendance ...200 more people every week worshipping Jesus...that deserves to be remembered and celebrated. PLACE STONE.

So, this was a year of growth: growth in CR, growth in baptisms, growth in Alpha, growth through church-planting... and surprising growth in our weekend attendance. **So...how did it happen?** That's the question the reporter asked when she called me a few weeks ago. "What did you do to make this happen?"

There are all kinds of possible answers. We could say we **changed our focus** from the insider to the outsider. We started using less churchy language. We preached a series on hospitality. Our people became more intentional about inviting their friends. We closed the balcony to increase intimacy...and increase the number of complaints I received. We improved the sound and light system. We redecorated the foyer. We handed out mugs and called visitors. We offered more opportunities for people to receive Jesus and be baptized. **We could say that... because it is true, and... it would be idolatrous.**

The growth we experienced in CR and Alpha and baptisms and church plant and attendance didn't happen because of what WE decided to do. It happened because of what GOD decided to do. Here's how I responded to that reporter: **"...any answer...that doesn't start with this being a movement of the Holy Spirit... prompted by a year of preaching on prayer and spiritual warfare, would be self-congratulatory and ungrateful."** And, I could have added, dangerous!

If last year was a year of growth, it is only because God, in his grace and purpose, decided to do a new thing. And isn't that exactly what our scripture passage recounts? The people of Israel were not told to set up stones to memorialize how good and faithful THEY had been. They had NOT been good and faithful, as a matter of fact. But God was...despite their inconstancy. It was always about God.

It was God who **heard the cry** of his people in bondage. It was God who **called Moses** to deliver them from Egypt. It was God who **sent ten plagues** to persuade pharaoh to let his people go. It was God who **parted the Red Sea** to allow his people to escape. It was God who **caused walls** of water to crash down their enemies. It was God who **brought manna** every morning to feed his people and **caused water** to bubble out of a stone. It was God who **preserved his people during** 40 years of wandering. And it was God who, **when the time had come** for his people to enter the Promised Land, **parted the waters of the Jordan River** so that, once more, they could walk across dry land and into God's future.

It was all God. Despite Moses' insecurity, it was God. Despite pharaoh's stubbornness, it was God. Despite Aaron's idolatry, it was God. Despite the people's constant complaining, it was God. It was all and always ...God.

So, as we look back over an astonishing year of growth, we acknowledge **that God has done a great thing. And we give HIM the glory and honor and praise.** To be a part of a congregation at such an exciting time... is an extraordinary privilege. So I want to do something extraordinary for our time of offering to mark this event and end this year.

Every offering is a way for us to say, "I want to be a part of what God is doing here." God has used your generosity to accomplish this great work. So, to our gives... thank you! This is the last day of our fiscal year...the day we close the books on one of the most remarkable years in our history. You might have noticed that we are running a little behind; your year-end gift today, plate or on-line, will help us close that gap.

But I want to do something different. Instead of passing a plate, I want you to come forward, if able, to present your offering. **If you are guest, just drop the connect card in; that's all we expect.** Then, you will see a pile of small stones. Take one, hold on to it, and instead of returning to your seat, form a circle alllll the way around the sanctuary. I want to close this service...and this year...looking at each other! At our brothers and sisters who make up this remarkable, Sweetheart Church that God blessed in an extraordinary way. So...as you are able, come forward, leave your gift, grab a stone and circle up. (And if you are unable to come, ushers will come to you).