

STORY IN THE STONES

A Triptych of God's Goodness

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On 11 October 2009 Redlands CRC (Queensland) celebrated their 10th Anniversary. “Stones” were unveiled as part of this celebration – stones which retold the story of God’s faithfulness. Dave Groenenboom reflects on the story in the stones.

The book of Joshua tells us about the people of Israel entering the promised land after 430 years slavery in Egypt, and 40 years in the wilderness. They had waited for so long to enter the promised land, but to do so they had to cross the flooded Jordan River. These people were as scared of water and swimming as we are of getting lost in the desert.

But God...

But God in his miraculous grace and power, stopped the floodwaters and led them across the river bed on dry ground. Joshua 4 tells us how God told Joshua and the people to set up stones taken from the middle of the riverbed. These stones would be a perpetual sign of when God had cut off the waters of the Jordan as the ark of the covenant and the people crossed the river.

The ‘standing stones’ were to be an ongoing reminder of God’s goodness and grace, as people told this great story to their children (4:6-7)

Now, this is a picture of some similar stones in Gezer, Israel.

No one actually knows why those stones were set up. The story has



been lost, and we’re not aware of the circumstances surrounding that, either. What we do know is that somewhere, parents stopped telling their children. Somehow, children lost connection with a wonderful event of the past. Isn’t that sad? Sad that children never heard their parents tell them about the wonderful grace and power of God!

In the three weeks leading up to our celebration of 10 years as a church family, we have unveiled some ‘standing stones’ of our own. They are not monoliths or stone cairns. They are actually three pieces of art on canvas.

A triptych of God’s goodness:

The First Stone

The first stone tells the story of how God established and planted this small group of 40+ people, and set them up as Redlands CRC. In 1998 a group of people from the Mansfield CRC started sharing their vision of how great it would be to plant a church in the Wellington Point area. There were already a number of families living there, and there was not a strong



evangelical presence. So the people prayed and dreamed, sharing their desire with the Mansfield leadership. In February 1999 a little more than 40 people started meeting in the Ormiston State School. Their desire was not only to be a ‘church presence’, they also wanted to be an authentic community of Jesus

followers. They wanted to be salt and light and hope in their community.

This first stone is a reminder to us that God plants his church, and we honour him for that.

The Second Stone



The second stone tells us about another distinct act of God, and it's wonderful reminder of how richly he provides. In 2004, just two years after our building was complete, we were already running out of space. God had brought growth to RCRC – now numbering about 450 people. We canvassed our immediate neighbours to see if there was any possibility of

buying more land and expanding our current site. While there was some indication that we may be given future options in property purchase, there was just no possibility for us to do anything at that time. Doors were just 'closed' all round.

In 2005 a property was purchased a few kilometres away, and the thought was that we may be able to relocate. Following a feasibility study, however, it was clear that this property would not be suitable either. So there we were: by God's grace growing, but with no capacity to expand.

Then, late in 2006, a mouse chewed through a cable in our security system, meaning that our neighbours were disturbed by our alarm going off at about 3am every morning. In the course of making apology to one of the neighbours, we learn that a property near ours was coming onto the market. Arrangements were made to make the purchase, even though it was not immediately adjacent to RCRC. Two weeks later, the most resistant and intransigent neighbour offered to sell their property to us. And in another few weeks, a third neighbour had lined up. Seriously, this was – and still is – incredible for us. There is no other way to explain this except for God's miraculous working. And really, it humbled us. We had kind of given up on this ever happening – and we should never have done that. God is always bigger than our barriers.

The second stone reminds us of God's provision.

The Third Stone



Interestingly, at the very time we were celebrating God's provision, Pastor Clinton Berends discovered a melanoma on his neck. Clinton underwent an operation to remove the cancer, but learned later that the cancer had metastasised, and there were tumours in his lungs and liver. Chemotherapy, Clinton & Tracy, offered no hope of healing at all. So together they made the decision to commence an heroic dietary regime under the guidance of a local naturopath. Around these actions, the church family fell to their knees. We were under no illusions, and held grave fears for Clinton's future. It was an incredibly difficult time. From the start we acknowledged we were in God's hand as

powerfully and as fully in trial and tears as we were in times of joy and blessing. Our only guarantee was God's faithfulness, and that he would lead us through.

This third stone depicts the wonderful day we heard that Clinton was healed and cancer free. March 16, 2008. God restores!

Alexandra Newton had the presence of mind to take a picture from the back of the auditorium as together we sang "all I have needed your hand has provided, great is your faithfulness, Lord unto me!" Just two months before this wonderful news, in January, I thought it was the beginning of the end. I visited Clinton & Tracy in their home, and what I saw troubled me greatly. Clinton was drawn, fatigued, weak, lying on the couch. I remember driving home very quietly, driving through tears and an odd, angry prayer, fearing the worst.

But God... God had other plans. In a miraculous work of grace and power, God worked a healing and restoration that still amazes us. This is how God is: his grace is new every morning. *All I have needed your hand has provided...*

And while that glorious reality draws our awe, and we stand open mouthed, we also recognise that for Clinton & Tracy it came after a deep dark night of fear and uncertainty.

Like today. We know we are firmly in the hands of our powerful God, the grace of his Son, and the wonderful presence of his Spirit.

And yet our celebration today, our 10th Anniversary, comes after some of the most difficult and trying years we have ever had as a congregation. This year has been a particular challenge. Even so, your leaders, united and together, have continued to serve in some of the most difficult pastoral times a church will ever go through.

But God... God has us in his hand, and he leads us on.

Allow me to encourage you with these words: Friends, what challenges are before you today? Never doubt God's sustaining grace, the power of His Holy Spirit in you, and his awesome ability to hold you up and give you endurance! These 'stones' do not tell a story of easy come prosperity, or that we have got it all together, or that we will never face another challenge. You should not see them as an indication that everything will work out with you, or with the church that you are part of. But they are a guarantee that you will remain in the hand of your loving Father, wherever and however he leads you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

It's true, isn't it? Tears of joy, and tears of pain. Sometimes they come together. We have these monuments to God's power and blessing and grace today. But we have not arrived. Now is not the time to rest. Our city, and tens of thousands of its citizens, are still far from God...

*This one question remains:
What other stones might we have in 10 years' time? In 20 years' time? In what new and wonderful ways will this great God's awesome grace be seen, when we*

look back then? What mountaintops of joy will there be, then? What challenges will he still place before us, nurturing us to growth and maturity? What other celebrations will there be as we glorify God, nurture the church to maturity, and bring others to Christ?

Imagine this city of Redlands as a place of hope because of Jesus – how good would that celebration be?

Not because of us so much. But because of Immanuel. God is with us. His assurance is this "I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth" (Matt 28:20)

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