Stewards of the Bones

Text: Exodus 13:17-22

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 17, 2021

A church anniversary begs the question…so what? So, we're 150 years old. Are we more efficient or more faithful or more important because of our longevity, or do we just have to patch the roof more frequently? Does looking back on anniversaries offer anything useful or is it merely a way to remember the glory days of yore to draw attention away from current irrelevance or troubles? Now there's an uncomfortable question.

I think the answer is that anniversary celebrations can be either of those things and more, depending on how we use them. And we're using this morning to remember that the church isn't this building or that one. It's us. And the only reason we have even a single anniversary to celebrate, let alone 150 of them, is because the people who are the church decide to become faithful stewards of the work of God through all the ups and downs and across the shifting sands of time.

Some of you were here to celebrate Crawford's 125th anniversary, and a few of you were here for the 100th in 1971. Lib Knight is just one year shy of having been here for the 75th. We celebrated those long-standing members earlier in the service and recognize the debt of gratitude we owe you. Without your sacrifice and contributions, we would not have made it to 150. And it will take the rest of us and those yet to come to ensure we get to 175, 200, and beyond. That's what this Sunday is about.

I chose the rather obscure Scripture passage that I did for today because I think it provides an excellent metaphor for digging up the past and bringing it forward into a new future. It reminds us that the bones of our past are sacred and that when we move to a new place, we must not forget the bones of what has shaped us. But first, some context.

Even if you don't really know the Bible, you may well have heard of Abraham, the patriarch common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Well, Abraham's son is Isaac, Isaac's son is Jacob, and Jacob has twelve sons whose families grow to become the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those twelve sons is Joseph. Jacob gives him special treatment, which means his brothers hate him. The brothers gang up on Joseph and sell him to slave traders who sell Joseph to an Egyptian. It's a great story with the amazing ending that Joseph ends up being second only to Pharaoh himself in all of Egypt.

A famine hits Joseph's homeland, where his father and brothers still live, and Joseph's family heads to Egypt where there's food. Joseph gives them good land and they grow and prosper. Joseph dies an important man in Egypt but he's still in love with the land of his ancestors and makes his family swear that if ever they go back, they will take his bones with them and bury them back home.

Years go by, a new Pharaoh comes, gets nervous that the Hebrews are starting to outnumber the native Egyptians and enslaves the Hebrews. Four hundred years go by and then you get Moses who leads the Hebrews on a run for freedom. They're leaving so fast they don't even have time for bread to rise, but they do stop to fulfill an old promise to someone who now lives only as legend in their minds. They find the bones of old Joseph, put them on a cart, and head for a home none of them has ever seen. That's 40 chapters of Scripture in three paragraphs.

Now getting the bones of Joseph is a nice gesture and all that, but it's a heck of a thing to stop and do when you're trying to outrun Pharaoh's chariots. I mean, his bones weren't going anywhere. Sneak back and get them later when things calm down a bit. But no. They freeze the frame, get the bones, and then go. It's that important. They had promised to be stewards of the bones, faithful trustees of the forgiving and generous spirit who once made it possible for them to survive a famine in a new home.

For many people, both then and now, the physical remains of our ancestors—be they bones or ashes—are more than just remains; in somewhat the same way that the bread and wine at communion become more than just bread and wine when we use them in a sacred way. They are pieces of the past that we want to carry with us into the future—things that have been dismembered by time that we want to re-member as we shape a new reality. They help us not to forget what is truly important, even after the shell has fallen or been burned away.

Last winter I was sure that by now we would be able to celebrate our 150th anniversary indoors, and I had the events all planned out in my head. I know many of you are disappointed that we're not back in there yet, and I hope by the time the snow flies we will have enough vaccinated children and our tech issues settled enough that we can again enjoy the warmth of the sanctuary. But as I thought about what it meant to be stewards of the bones; to take the dismembered past and re-member it for a new decade, century, and millennium, it suddenly felt very right to be out under a tent on this day.

When the enslaved Hebrews brought the bones of Joseph out of Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness with those bones for 40 years. In that time, they developed new worship practices, that the Bible presents as given by God to Moses. Guess what those instructions were? Build a tent. It was called the Tent of Meeting and the Israelites worshipped in that tent for probably 500 years or so, with an entire crew of people whose sole job was to pack it up and help move it whenever the people moved to a new location. It was half a millennium later that King David overrode God's objections and built a stationary temple of stone in Jerusalem.

In the earliest days of the Christian movement, church happened in people's homes, with the central event being a full meal—a feast where rich and poor ate together without distinction. Full communion. But when the Romans started rounding up Christians, throwing them to the lions, and setting them on fire, they had to abandon those house churches and their full meals, taking just a clandestine bit of bread and a sip of wine down into the catacombs—the network of tombs beneath the city—to worship in secret.

There they remembered just a taste of what they had known before and what they believed would come again, at least in the next life, if not in this. It was a couple hundred years of secrecy amidst the dead and elsewhere before the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine made it possible to worship publicly again.

Fast forward to the origins of Methodism in England in the mid 1700's when the Anglican priest, John Wesley, tried to reform the Church of England by insisting that people should live their faith throughout the week and not just show up and go through the motions on Sunday. He was booted from his pulpit for his efforts; barred from the building or preaching from a pulpit. What did he do? He decided that he would preach while standing on his father's grave, since no one could kick him off of that.

And then he went further. Once he was out of the building, he saw what he couldn't before, including throngs of people early in the morning, headed for a day's hard labor in the mines and elsewhere. And so John Wesley decided to go preach to them—standing out in the fields without any cover at all. He began to preach three times every day out there, drawing tens of thousands of people. He preached over 40,000 sermons across his lifetime and rode over 250,000 miles on horseback to do it. His brother Charles wrote their hymns, taking the message of God love and setting it to popular pub songs that the people listening were likely to know and be able to sing along. Charles Wesley wrote over 6,500 hymns!

As the Methodist movement grew and jumped the pond to these shores, it spread like wildfire by means of…wait for it…tent meetings. People came and camped out for a week to hear the preaching of God's word and to learn under the stars about a God who loved them enough to go out to them in the person of Jesus. The movement grew so fast that there were not enough clergy to go around, so the ones they had became "circuit riders," going from congregation to congregation on horseback.

That's why Methodists only have communion once a month. John Wesley believed we should have it every week; but the clergy shortage here in the US meant that congregations could only celebrate communion once a month, which is about how often the circuit rider could get to each church. The life of a circuit rider, galloping from church to church, was extremely harsh. The life expectancy of those clergy was 35 years of age. But while the clergy were riding around from church to church to do baptisms, weddings, and communion; it was the laity of each congregation who kept the church alive through word and song and Bible study.

In 1871, it was a Winchester lay woman named Lucinda Mason who decided that the "take God out to the people" way of Methodism needed a voice in Winchester. With the help of a prayer group from Cambridge, she and her husband, John, opened their home for church. Within a week they moved to a hall above a storefront downtown. Five years later, they built a wooden church where the congregation met for 45 years. In 1921 they abandoned that building, rented a hall for three years and had meetings in people's homes while they raised money to build what stands behind me. That was under the leadership of Rev. Alliston B. Gifford, for whom our Gifford Hall is named. But it was another lay couple, Frank and Winnifred Crawford, whose spirit, and gifts of time and treasure enabled us to have the building we now cherish that bears their name.

It's not the building that contains the spirit of this congregation. As we sang earlier, "the church is not a building…the church is the people." The bones that have been carried by the stewards of this church from then until now are not physical; but spiritual. And they stretch all the way back to a tent in the Sinai wilderness that was built, tended, and carried tenderly from place to place by a bunch of former slaves, who were smart enough to bring the bones of promise with them.

The spiritual bones stretch forward to a church hiding among the dead in the catacombs of Rome and on to a reformer in England who was forced out of his church to preach while literally standing on the bones of his father's grave and then out in the fields at the dawn of each day. And those spiritual bones came here on horseback, with weary clergy passing off most of the day-to-day duties to the lay preachers and other church members who God gifted and called to keep worship alive and the spirit growing, whether there was a preacher there on Sundays or not.

It's that heritage, those bones, that made the current denomination set aside a Sunday each October as Laity Sunday—the Sunday to remember that the church is the people and the United Methodist church in particular is built and maintained by the spirit, grit, and talent of its members. The laity. The Methodist practice of moving clergy around is built on the bones of that fundamental understanding that the church is its people. Different pastors with different sets of gifts come in and out, each one helping to shore up the area of the church where they are best suited to help. And then we move on. But the pastor alone is not the church.

The building is not the church. This lovely and special building may stand or fall; but that is not the church. Thank goodness, because last Sunday, as Brian went to close the front door after church, the handle came off in his hand. Literally, the way we entered the church for the past 150 years is shifting to something new. I couldn't have thought of a better metaphor if I tried. And just like the bones that have been carried here since the ancient Hebrews could have told us, that new life has begun in a tent. We don't know fully what that will look like; we have yet to see the promised land. But we are the church—together. And, together, we will figure it out. Amen.