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a Guide for Churches

Celebrating the



Milestones of Faith

Laura Keeley and Robert J. Keeley



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Christian Resources

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Laura Keeley and Robert J. Keeley

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Chapter 1

God Is Faithful: Why We Celebrate Milestones

When our first baby was born, we took loads of pictures. Like most new parents, we couldn't resist documenting *everything* she did. We have pictures of her sitting with Grandma and Grandpa, pictures of her in her high chair, pictures of her playing in the sand on the beach, and the list goes on and on.

But by the time our fourth child arrived, we had to pack so much stuff when we went out that our camera rarely made the list. We didn't give up on pictures completely, but we mostly got out the camera on special occasions. So now when we page through our scrapbooks we see that nearly half of our pictures are from Christmas and birthdays. If a stranger were to look at them she would think that all we do is open presents and eat cake!

We know we're not alone. Lots of people have albums full of pictures of birthdays, Christmases, and a few other events. Why? Because we use special events as "markers" in our lives. These times are so important to us that the whole family gathers to celebrate them, so special that we remember to get the camera out to record them.

Our own church family celebrates special times like this too, but we usually don't take pictures—at least not with a camera. We remember those moments in other ways. We remember the promises that parents and congregation make on the morning of a baptism. We remember the time our pastor had to help eight-year-old Steven light the Christ candle because it was too tall for Steven to reach. We remember the first time four-year-old Matt stood up front to sing a song with the other young children and was so nervous that he cried the whole time. His mother had to help him hold

Special events remind us of how much we need each other and how God has worked in our lives through God's people.

the mirror to go along with the line “He’s got everybody here in his hands.” When the song was finished Matt looked at his mother and exclaimed with relief, “I did it!”

We remember the announcement of the sudden death of one of our church’s older members who was in Florida for the winter. We remember the baptism of Larry, a middle-aged homeless man who became an important part of our community and professed his faith in Christ.

These special events remind us of how much we need each other and how God has worked in our lives through God’s people. They remind us throughout the years that no matter where we are, God is faithful.

But churches, just like our families, are much more than birthdays and baptisms. The congregation cares for children in nursery and eagerly watches as they later join us in worship. Before we know it, they’re in youth group, serving on committees, and becoming deacons and elders. As children grow up they experience many significant “firsts” in their faith walk, but we often miss the opportunities to celebrate those milestones.

When our own children were younger, we introduced them to the book *Just in Case You Ever Wonder* by Max Lucado. It’s a conversation between a father and son about life and death. The father reassures the son that when his life is over he will be in heaven, and he looks forward to seeing his son there. That was a message we wanted our children to hear, so we made a point of reading the book to our kids on their birthdays.

Bob had a hard time doing this, though. His emotions would surface, his eyes would well up with tears, and Laura would often have to finish reading. Now our kids tease their dad about that—they refer to the book as “the one that makes Dad cry.” But that doesn’t bother us, or them. They remember that we read it, and they know that the message is still important. It is one of our collective family memories that’s reinforced every once in a while when it comes up in conversation—we each remember it individually, but we also remember it together.

Milestones are like that. They are events that stick in the memory of individuals but also in the collective memory of the church. Just as our children never doubted that they were part of our family, we want members of our church to know that they belong too. We want them to see that church is more than a place to get a spiritual refill—it’s another place where they have family.

As God’s family we need to pause at important moments to acknowledge God’s presence and faithfulness and celebrate as a community how God is at work. One of the ways to do that is by marking the faith milestones in each other’s lives.

Finding Our Place in God's Story

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen remind us in their book *The Drama of Scripture* that Scripture is one cohesive story. The Bible, they write,

is a unified and progressively unfolding drama of God's action in history for the salvation of the whole world. The Bible is not a mere jumble of history, poetry, lessons in morality and theology, comforting promises, guiding principals and commands; instead it is fundamentally coherent. Every part of the Bible—each event, book, character, command, prophecy and poem must be understood in the context of the one story line.

—*The Drama of Scripture*, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen (Baker 2004), p. 12. Used by permission.

Celebrating faith milestones gives us an opportunity to directly relate our individual stories to the story of God's people from Scripture. The Bible is more than stories of people who lived long ago and far away; it connects directly to the saints and sinners who sit next to us in the church pew every week. We too have a place in God's great story. Linda Staats writes,

Every ending, beginning, transition and moment in life is an opportunity to actively claim God's redemptive and renewing work in the world and in our lives. To weave our stories with God's story is to live with confidence in God's care in every way, everywhere—all the time.

—“Passing on Faith—Milestone to Milestone,” *Lifelong Faith*, Spring 2008, p. 8.

The idea of celebrating faith milestones is nothing new. God often directed the Israelites to set up literal stones to remind them of his place in their lives. The first four chapters of the book of Joshua provide an excellent example of the concept of marking milestones.

When the Israelites left Egypt they were on a faith journey as well as a physical journey. Crossing the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land was a noteworthy event in their lives. It marked the end of a forty-year wilderness adventure, but it also marked one of the first events with their new leader, Joshua.

Drawing a parallel to the beginning of their journey, the Lord directed the Israelites to cross a river. But none of the people crossing the river with Joshua had a direct memory of the trip across the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his army in hot pursuit, because none of them had been there. For them it was a story they had heard from their parents or grandparents.

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But were there some, perhaps, who had never heard that story? Were there some parents who never got around to telling their children about that defining moment at the Red Sea? On the one hand, it seems almost unbelievable that they would have forgotten to pass that story on. But on the other hand, it's human nature. There are important things that all of us neglect to say to our children, our relatives, or our friends. The daily routine gets in the way, and we need a nudge to remember to stop and pass the story on.

God wanted to help the memory of this particular Jordan crossing to stay alive. So he commanded Joshua to choose one man from each tribe, send them back into the Jordan—an act of faith itself!—and take a stone from the middle of the river. The stones were then placed on the very spot where God had stopped the river so the people could cross safely to the other side.

God told the Israelites to set up those stones so that when they were walking along the way their kids would see the stones and ask about them:

In the future when your descendants ask their parents, “What do these stones mean?” tell them, “Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.” For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.

—Joshua 4:21-24

Jolanda Malburg writes, “Faith milestones give us an opportunity to celebrate God’s work, remember God’s faithfulness, and pass on faith from one generation to the next. Milestones remind us that we have a powerful, promise-keeping God who goes before us; they challenge us to be promise-land people who follow God’s call.” (APCE *Advocate*, Fall 2007, Volume 32, Number 3, page 9.)

It was important for the people of Israel to remember who they were and what God had done in their lives. It’s equally important for us! Like Israel, we can mark the milestones along our faith journey to help us think about God’s work in us. As a church we can celebrate moments in our faith walk, both corporate and individual, that remind us how loving and merciful God is and encourage us to tell of God’s faithfulness again and again.

The milestones in our lives can be baptisms, professions of faith, birthdays, retirements, or any other time where we come together as a community of believers to intentionally acknowledge God’s provision, grace, and care. Congregations can and should celebrate many milestones together. Each milestone celebration enriches our community and builds up the body of Christ by helping us all remember that we travel this journey together.

Measuring Faith?

It is mid-February as we write this, and the TV weather forecasters are talking about snow. This is normal for February in Michigan, but today we're coming up on a significant event. This weekend we hit the 99-inch mark for snow this season. If we get more snow—and it looks like we will—we will pass 100 inches. In fact, if we get seven more inches of snow this will be the second-snowiest season on record.

To paraphrase Scripture, “There is nothing new under the snow.” We know what snow looks like and feels like. We even know what *a lot* of snow looks and feels like—the record we will shortly break was set only last year. Assuming we pass this snowfall landmark, we will soon hear about how many other seasons have passed the 100-inch mark. The television weather crews will be beside themselves with statistics. Part of what makes all this snow worth talking about is the fact that we can measure it.

Wouldn't it be great if we could measure faith just as concretely? If we could clearly see how a book, a sermon, a service project, or a conversation with a friend had helped our faith to grow? But faith isn't like that. We can't always see when God is working in other people—or even in ourselves. We don't have a scale to measure it. Even measuring the snowfall in our back yard is tricky because it's deeper in some spots than in others. In that way, snow is a lot like faith. Pastor Dave Vroege from North Halifax, Nova Scotia, once said, “That's how faith usually works—in fits and starts and sideways shuffles, with questions and doubts and moments of grace and beauty.”

We don't expect the faith of a three-year-old child to be the same as the faith of a thirty-year-old, or the faith of a high school student to be the same as the faith of her grandmother. Maturation, life experience, knowledge of the world, and many other factors—including the people we have relationships with—shape us and shape our faith.

Christian Smith, coauthor of *Soul Searching*, says that learning faith is a lot like learning a second language. You don't learn a language best just by studying it; you learn it best by being around people who *speak* it. When you immerse yourself in a culture of that language you pick up much more by osmosis than you ever could by study alone. The same is true for faith. To grow in our faith we must see it, interact with it, play with the ideas, and be around people who are living it.

In our scrapbook is a photo of our son Bryan when he was two years old. He had a little plastic lawnmower, and one of the pictures shows him pushing his lawnmower right behind his dad, who is pushing a full-sized lawnmower. Bryan saw what it was like to take care of the yard and was trying that on for size. He wanted to do what his dad was doing.

Wouldn't it be great if we could measure how a book, a sermon, a service project, or a conversation with a friend had helped our faith to grow?

We can not expect children to grow into mature disciples unless they see how other followers of Christ live a life of faith.

This same type of modeling happens in more subtle but no less profound ways as children get older. They model their behavior after the people they see. When they see their parents, their aunts and uncles, their friends, the church elders and deacons, and their Sunday school teachers standing to sing together or to pray the Lord's Prayer in unison, they learn what it means to be an adult who worships God.

Children and teens need to see adult people of faith who are deepening their relationship with God. They need to know how adults pray. They need to see them in times of sorrow and doubt, and in times of sadness and joy. We can not expect children to grow into mature disciples unless they see how other followers of Christ live a life of faith.

Faith Is a Lifelong Journey

The Christian life is not something we "achieve." We preach about grace. We know that faith is a gift from God that grows and deepens over a lifetime. In the Reformed tradition our creeds and confessions remind us that it's really all about God's work in our lives and not what we do. Yet sometimes we act as if it really *is* all about us, about how solid our faith is and how much we do to earn God's favor.

Consider how a person's faith journey is marked within many Reformed churches. A baby is baptized soon after birth, reminding us that God's hand is firmly on that child. We then nurture the child until at some point in his or her life the child makes a public profession of faith or confirmation. Then what?

It would be interesting if, near the end of our life, we could look back over time and plot a graph of our faith journey. The graph line would have its ups and downs, showing times when our faith was strong or when we faced particularly nagging doubts. But we would hope that the line would also show a general trend upward as we got to know God more deeply and came to a better understanding of God's plan for us.

The current two-step system of baptism and public profession or confirmation, however, suggests two things. First, it suggests that there is a line of growth between baptism and profession of faith or confirmation. And second, it suggests that the line flattens out after profession of faith is made. The milestone structure we have adopted implies that we are expected to grow to a certain point, and when we reach it, we have arrived—it's time to coast.

And, frankly, some of us do act that way, don't we? After a young person or an adult has made a profession of faith, we haven't always been very encouraging or watchful as a church to see that his or her faith is still growing. Many of us are now

coasting in our own faith; not even pausing to realize what God has done and is doing in our lives.

This two-milestone structure also sends the message that baptized children are not full-fledged members of the church of Christ. While no one expects four-year-olds to vote in congregational meetings, the message goes beyond that. By waiting for a public profession to recognize our children's faith journey, we imply that they are the *future* of the church, rather than an important part of the church *today*.

But there's good news! There is a movement within Reformed denominations to broaden our approach to faith nurture and profession by marking many more milestones in each person's life.

A 2009 report from the Christian Reformed Church's Faith Formation Committee reminded congregations that faith should be viewed as "a life-long journey—begun at baptism and completed in eternity." The report highlighted the fact that the faith milestones approach is "based on the premise that *all* people of faith, from the newly-baptized infant to the elderly saint, grow in faith and mature in their walk as disciples *within the context of membership and life in a faith community*."

The report went on to describe how churches could mark milestones in a way that encourages the growth of the whole congregation:

For children and young people especially, the sense of *belonging* to a congregation is essential in the nurture of their faith and the support of their walk with Jesus. Significant steps in each child's faith development are intentionally (and publicly) recognized and celebrated by the entire body—hence the idea of "milestones." Similarly, the faith and life transitions experienced by teens, both sacred and ordinary, need to be acknowledged not only by families, but by the entire congregation. Nor is profession of faith the ultimate milestone in this paradigm! Significant faith moments in the lives of adults also provide opportunities for the congregation to affirm its communal faith as it encourages, supports, and celebrates life-long learning and growing in Christ."

—report of the CRC's Faith Formation Committee to Synod 2009

It is good to remind children that they are not working toward some point in their teen years when they will arrive at enough faith that the church will start to take them seriously. It is also good for adults to be reminded that we don't stop growing once we've publicly professed our faith. Milestone celebrations allow the church community to participate in the faith journey of *all* its members, not just the young.

Milestone celebrations allow the church community to participate in the faith journey of *all* its members, not just the young.

Milestones Are for Adults Too

In the current literature about faith milestones there are few models that include ideas for celebrating milestones in an adult's life. As a result, people can go through their entire adult lives in faithful service to God in the ministry of their church and the only time we acknowledge their walk of faith is at their funeral. By not taking the time to mark milestones in the lives of adults we have missed an important opportunity for all of us to learn about how we can better see God's work in our lives.

More than ten years ago, a council member at Woodlawn Church was looking for alternates when there weren't enough deacons to greet at the doors and receive the offering on Sunday mornings. He decided to ask Tim—an intellectually disabled adult who was always in church and always sitting at one of the doors—to help out.

Since that time, Tim has faithfully been on duty: arriving early, handing out bulletins as people enter, and passing the offering plates in his section of the sanctuary. In fact, Tim's parents say that if Tim has to miss a service, he is concerned about who will take care of these responsibilities.

The congregation recently decided to recognize Tim's more than ten years of service by installing him as an Associate Deacon. It was a milestone moment. During the installation, the pastor asked Tim whether God had called him to this task, and whether he promised to continue to do his work faithfully in service to Jesus his Lord. Tim responded, "I do."

At first glance there seem to be many more milestones in a child's life than in an adult's. But consider a few of the milestones along Karen's faith journey:

Karen was baptized as an infant in her parents' church.

When she was thirteen Karen went on a service project with her youth group. She was excited about what she had learned and about seeing people doing God's work in the community that she had visited. Along with some of her classmates, Karen stood in front of her congregation and told of the work she had done and how God had been active her in life.

At age sixteen Karen made a public profession of faith. She stood up in church, answered questions read from the same form that her parents had used many years before, and was welcomed into a deeper form of membership in her church.

After graduating from college Karen accepted the invitation to speak to her congregation about how God had been working in her life as she chose a career and broadened her view of the world.

At age thirty-one Karen was married and shortly after became a mother—both occasions were celebrated within her congregation. When Karen was thirty-five she changed careers. She took this opportunity to publicly give thanks to God and talk about how God had been faithful in her life.

At age fifty-seven Karen rejoiced at the birth of her first grandchild—indeed a gift from God!

As Karen aged she faced cancer, an automobile accident that resulted in a long recovery period, and the death of her husband as well as many friends and family members. At each of these occasions, she remembered God's faithful presence in her life and often shared those thoughts with her church family.

When we focus our milestone practices for adults on providing opportunities for people to tell their faith stories as their lives unfold, like Karen did, we can better understand our own walk with God.

So why doesn't everyone jump at the chance to tell others about how they've been shaped by God's faithful presence in their lives? Part of the reason is our culture—in some traditions people feel their faith is too private to talk about. Or they're worried that if they do talk about it they'll get emotional because it's too close to their hearts.

On top of that, public speaking is just plain scary for a lot of people. It's said that public speaking is the most common fear people have, and death is the second most common fear. We doubt that anyone would rather be in the coffin than giving the eulogy at a funeral, but so the story goes. Public speaking is something that makes many of us uncomfortable. So we need to acknowledge that and make faith talk as comfortable as possible for the people doing it.

It is not unreasonable, for example, to expect those elected to church office to be able to speak about their faith. There are ways to make this comfortable for people. The presentations can be brief; we can use interviews or pre-recorded video segments to help people for whom this is difficult. Sometimes the very effort to get the words out, even if we're trembling and reading from a scrap of paper, is a step of faith and a sign of God's strength at work within us! We all need to hear from each other about God's work in our lives, and we need to share that work with others.

Why We Need Faith Milestones Now

You might be thinking, we've gotten along just fine for many years without worrying about milestones, haven't we? Perhaps, but there are some very compelling reasons for thinking about milestones now.

Young People Leaving Church

Top on the list is a concern for twenty- to thirty-year-olds. In previous generations some people stopped attending church for a while after high school or college. But

after a year or so they usually realized that they really did care about the church's place in their life, and they came back. That has changed. Today, people are much less likely to return to church after an extended period away.

Celebrating faith milestones can help young people, who are increasingly feeling disconnected from the church, recognize that they *do* belong. Mindy Bak describes the need for these celebrations like this:

When Hansel and Gretel leave the safety of their house to venture into the woods, they leave a trail of breadcrumbs to mark the way back home. The children of God have a way of wandering off as well, which is why it is ever important for us as faithful leaders and parents to leave a trail by which they may always find their way home. Instead of breadcrumbs, we leave a path of milestones. This way, when our children (of any age) become lost and begin to long for home, they will only have to look about them to see the trail of milestones and say, "Look, here is God in my life. And here, and here, and here." Milestones . . . help us find our way back home into God's arms, as well as the welcoming arms of those who love and care for us.

—Mindy Bak in *Together in Faith*, Bloomington, Minn.: The Youth & Family Institute, 1999, www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org, 1-877-239-2492

Extended Adolescence

Changes in Western culture also offer good reasons to celebrate faith milestones. A hundred years ago people went from being children to being young adults; they got jobs, they took on adult responsibilities, and they took their place in society. At that time, having special church staff or programs for these young people would have been deemed ridiculous. Young adults were not disconnected from adult society—they were part of adult society.

In the 1950s teenagers started developing their own culture and we've been struggling with how to respond ever since. The extended adolescence that is now a societal norm has made for a longer period of time when post-high-school kids are disconnected. Many teens, especially those who go on to college and graduate school, postpone getting a full-time job and taking on adult responsibilities until well into their twenties.

Increasing Mobility

We are also losing the "sense of place" that once tied young people to the church they grew up in. Our parents and grandparents were likely to have lived in the same home throughout their childhood and teen years. But today many families with children move several times before the kids graduate from high school. In the past, when a young Christian couple married they almost certainly attended the church one of their families attended. Now many young couples live far away from either side of the family.

We are perhaps the most mobile society that has ever existed. We travel so much that cell phones have gone from being a nice option to the primary means of communication. We no longer call a place—we call a person. While this gives us much more freedom (and is not a bad thing in itself) it represents an important shift. When we used to call people's homes, we interacted with their parents or siblings. Now we call the person directly, no matter where they are—even if they're on the other side of the country! This sense of movement reinforces the notion that we have no responsibility to a particular place. If we don't "belong" in the sense that previous generations did, then our allegiance to any particular group of people, or any congregation, is likely to diminish too.

Technological Advances

Research also indicates that the amount of conversation between parents and children is at an all-time low. The generations just don't talk to each other as much as they used to. Technology and affluence have played a role in this trend. When a whole family lives together in one house with only a few rooms, there is bound to be more discussion than if each child has his or her own special place to hide away. Add to this the explosion of media options and we have the "iPod-ing" of society—where each person is able to tailor his or her own media experience to match personal tastes.

Many homes, like ours, have as many computers as they have people. Our kids sometimes sit in the same room, all looking at their own computer screens, reading different things on the Web or watching videos or chatting online. They've even been known to text people sitting just a few feet away. Again, this explosion of media and communication options is not necessarily a bad thing. We're grateful, for example, that we don't have to watch the same videos our kids watch. We're also grateful that it's now much easier to stay in touch with our daughter who lives hundreds of miles away. But the technological advances that help us stay in touch with some people are likely to reduce the number of significant encounters we have with others—like the real live church members we rub shoulders with weekly.

Technological advances have, in many cases, increased the gap between the young and old, making it less likely that young people will have meaningful encounters with someone significantly older than them. As a result, our society has fewer and fewer places where different generations intersect. Church is now one of the very few places where we have an intergenerational experience.

These examples highlight the fact that we are not the same society we used to be. We're not advocating a "those were the days" nostalgia for the past; there were many troubling situations in the past that made life difficult for children and adults. But

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there was also a greater sense of shared community. Because there are fewer people today whose faith story we know, there are fewer people in whom we can see God's work of faithfulness.

Passing on Faith in Community

The individualism of Western society has also challenged our understanding of covenant. Our culture tells us that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, that we should be self-reliant, that dependence on others is a sign of weakness.

This mentality has found its way into the church, where our service to God as a community has been replaced by a focus on a personal relationship with Jesus.

Celebrating faith milestones can help restore our sense of covenant grace and lead us to live as people who are "blessed to be a blessing." When we baptize our children we affirm that they are part of the covenant God formed with Abraham. That covenant story is rehearsed each week when we worship together. Our reliance on God's covenant grace is sharpened when we take the time to clearly articulate how that grace plays out in our lives.

It may seem that milestones celebrations would only reinforce our tendency toward individualism, as these occasions often focus on the lives of individuals. But one of the most powerful things about celebrating faith milestones is that when I celebrate a milestone in your life, my faith is nurtured too. I'm reminded of how God has worked in your life, my life, and in the lives of all of his people. If we use these celebrations to reinforce the work of God in the lives of people in our congregation, then they become important faith-building events for the whole community.

Some congregations have put a lot of energy into equipping parents to build the faith of their children at home. This is an admirable goal. It's important to make sure parents are ready to encourage a life of faith in their children. But the faith community is much broader than individuals or families. By focusing too narrowly on families we leave behind single adults as well as kids and teens whose families aren't part of the congregation. At an infant's baptism the congregation makes vows that aren't limited to training parents. Those vows call us to build a connection with the children in our congregation so we can nurture them in faith. This is no less true of teens or adults who are baptized as believers; we share in their journey by mentoring, encouraging, praying for, and celebrating with them as they grow.

Without this sense of community the church becomes marginalized; little more than a filling station where members go to top off their spiritual tanks for another week so that they can go out and face a secular society. This is a misunderstanding of what

Celebrating faith milestones can help restore our sense of covenant grace, and lead us to live as people who are "blessed to be a blessing."

it means to be God's people. We are a community on a mission of transformation—we're called to celebrate God's grace in our lives and share God's grace with one another and the world.

Marking faith milestones makes us sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst and helps us identify and share our stories of faith. As we celebrate milestones, we become a community of seekers as well as believers, always on the lookout for God's hand at work, always expecting to join in God's mission. As we acknowledge God's presence in times of pain and suffering as well as joy and health, we become a welcoming community that is eager to hear the stories of others and ready to help everyone discover how their story finds its meaning in God's great story.