

“The Complicated Gift of Memory”
Joshua 24:1–3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1–7
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Memory loss is no laughing matter — this I know from family history and professional experience — but we cannot cry all of the time. So, finding ways to laugh at what is most painful can be cathartic. In this spirit, I share the followed bit of humor with you.

Three older men lived together and tried to help each other but all three had struggles. One day, one of them yelled out to the other two from the second floor of their home, “I’m in the bathtub, but I can’t remember whether I’m getting into the tub or out.” The second man said, “I’m on my way to help,” but halfway up the staircase, he stopped and yelled out to the other two, “I’m on the staircase, but I can’t remember whether I am going upstairs or down.” At this point, the third man knocked on the kitchen table and said, “Thank goodness, I am not as bad off as those guys!” He yelled out that he was on the way but then paused and wondered, “Was that someone knocking at the door?”

We have to laugh, but in the end, memory loss is not a laughing matter. It is painful to experience and memory is critical to our existence. It reminds us of who we are as individuals, as a church and as a nation. It enables us to have continuity between who we have been, who we are now and who we will be. It grounds us and gives us hope.

Yet memory is a complicated gift. We remember that our founders established a nation where all would be equal, but in the beginning, all did not mean *all*. It meant all white, male landowners. Words from Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus” may be posted in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” but in most times, including ours, we have not welcomed many in need. We refused entry to many Jews seeking refuge during the Holocaust. We mistreated Japanese-Americans during World War II. When we remember our history as a nation, we must remember all of this.

In like manner, we remember the rich heritage we have in this church of being founded as a bi-racial community, maintaining our unity in Christ and reaching out to the world. But we nearly died over a theological split in the 1830s, we failed our early tests on racial inclusion in the 1960s, and in many periods, we have been more concerned with our own internal issues than with the world around us. When we claim our heritage, we must claim all of this.

Personal memory works the same way. There is good and bad in all of us, things we love to remember and things we would like to forget, things we have said and done, things left undone for better and worse. Memory is complicated, whether we are talking about personal memory, sacred memory or national memory. Yet memory is a gift, no matter what the character of the memories, because all of the past shapes who we are today in some way, and we have something to learn from it all.

Our readings from Psalm 78 and Joshua 24 underscore this reality. The psalmist says he has *dark sayings* from of old to make known. He wants to make sure the memory of what God has done for the people in the past — in liberating them from bondage, providing for their needs in the wilderness and bringing them into the Promised Land — are passed on from generation to generation, like relay runners passing a baton. He doesn't want them to be like the US men's 4x100 relay team that has often had the fastest runners but dropped the baton. The memory of God's goodness must be passed along to each new generation.

But what he wants to make sure is passed on is not just what God has done for the people but how they have responded — sometimes in faith, other times with rebellion. The rest of the psalm, past the verses we read in the call to worship, names in great detail their failings, thus telling us why the psalmist says he has *dark sayings* to make known. And he wants all of this to be remembered — the divine and the human, the good and the bad — because it all has something to teach the people.

In the reading from Joshua, the people are called to renew their commitment to God. After everything God has done for them in clearing the way for them to get to and then settle in the Promised Land, Joshua calls them to choose whom they will serve — the God who has

brought them this far or the gods their ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt. Many of the people who started this journey are no longer alive and many living in this time were not born when some of the events took place, but everyone who is present is included. All of the people are called to remember what God has done for *them*.

But as they remember what God has done for them, they also remember how they have responded, not always in faith, even in the Promised Land. So, when Joshua calls them to renewal, he underscores the seriousness of what he is asking and places a large stone under an oak tree as a sign of their commitment. They are making a covenant with God and though they will never be perfect, they need to rise above their failures of the past and prove more faithful.

In both readings, memory is a gift but a complicated one with both pleasant and unpleasant content, all of which helps the people.

So, what is the message for us? One message is that we are called to exercise faithful stewardship of the memories we have of our past behavior — the good and the bad. If we can hold on to our memories of times when we met a challenge faithfully, we can find strength for facing future challenges. Our stewardship words always reference such experiences and they will again this year. And as we live through COVID-19, we are making new memories which we will need to share with our children and their children about how we got through this time.

But faithfulness also involves facing our difficult memories so that we can learn from them. Those who ignore or deny history are destined to repeat it. So, as a nation, we need to learn from the racist layers of our past. It is an ongoing task. We have not learned all we need to learn. We also need to learn from our rejection of Holocaust refugees. That lesson too is still a work in progress. How much shame will future generations feel for this period of our nation? And I am not just talking about the current administration, but about numerous administrations that have failed to develop a comprehensive immigration plan which balances security and compassion. We also need to learn from the Civil War what happens when we do not address our divisions. We are living in a dangerous time for our democracy. We need to learn from the past.

In like manner, faithful stewardship over our church history requires that we own all of the past, including the periods when we did not look our best — when we split and nearly died, when we denied membership to a man because of the color of his skin, when we have been so busy playing church that we have forgotten to be church. We have a rich heritage with many strengths to build on in education, worship and fellowship, service and outreach to the world. But we also have memories that make us cringe. Rather than seeking to deny or avoid them, we need to acknowledge them and vow not to repeat them, learn not just the specific lessons about unity, inclusion and perspective, but the broader trajectories of these lessons. We no longer exclude people because of race, but whom are we tempted to exclude?

We are also called to exercise faithful stewardship of personal memories, including the more difficult ones. Some of these cause feelings of guilt while others are more about grief. But we benefit from facing these parts of our past, and if we do not, they will continue to wound us. Guilt and grief are gifts that keep on giving!

Yet there is another message in these texts, the most important message. We are called to exercise faithful stewardship of our memories not just of our past behavior but also of God's goodness to us. The only complication here is in the details of the Joshua narrative wherein God helps Israel by harming other people. But there is a way to view the book of Joshua that lessens our struggle with it. We might view it not as a straightforward historical narrative but as a story loosely based in historical material and told for a community in exile as a way of bolstering national self-esteem. Israel was never a political or military power, but after being destroyed by the Babylonians, their self-view hit rock bottom. Joshua tells a story of a time when God helped them to be more, even if the story takes some liberty with the details.

If we can stay out of the weeds, the story describes a time when the people remember how good God has been to them. In like manner, the psalmist makes a plea for the people to remember the glorious deeds of the Lord and then lists them. We have a calling to remember what God has done for us in the past, so that we might find strength for the future.

On a personal level, I remember the way God worked through a youth ministry in Louisville, Kentucky not just to bring me into church, but to connect me with Jesus and to expose me to a bigger view of life. I also remember the way I was held in God's care when my mother died suddenly at 48 with a cerebral aneurysm, given space to grieve and surrounded with compassion and hope. Surely you have memories like these. Hold on to them, cherish them, and allow them to lift your spirits in this time of isolation and unrest.

In this church, we have known God's care in more ways than we can count. The church was resurrected in the 1830s. The church not only survived the Civil War and two World Wars, not to mention a pandemic in 1918; it ministered to the community through all these challenges because of the grace of God at work among us. And we have sensed God's hand in these days of COVID-19 and much unrest. We have great challenges before us, but an even greater God with us.

Even as a nation, we have sensed the hand of God guiding us, though God's concern extends to all people, not just us. We do well to remember this reality too as we face significant future challenges.

In his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes a village where people have a contagious kind of amnesia. It begins with older people but moves on to younger folks until all the people are forgetting the names of common objects. One young man tries to limit the damage by putting labels on everything. "This is a table," "This is a window," "This is a cow; it has to be milked every morning." On the main road at the entrance to the town he puts up two large signs. One reads, "The name of our village is Macondo." The other, the largest of all, reads, "God exists."

There are things that we cannot afford to forget. Who we are and whose we are; from whence we have come and to where we are going; the particular stories of our family, church and nation; most of all, how God has guided us and strengthened us — these things are critical to our existence! We cannot afford to forget them. Some of our memories may be complicated, difficult even, but that's okay. We benefit from holding on to all of them.