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Texts: Deuteronomy 4:9; 32:7; Luke 22: 14-19

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“A Past That Promises More”

Not long ago, a close friend sent me a picture of himself with somebody else I didn't recognize. “Look who came to visit,” the accompanying message said. I looked closely, but couldn't place who this was. Sheepishly, I admitted as much, and asked for a reminder. I waited while the three dots pulsed on my phone, and then the response arrived: “He was a part of that seminar you taught, back in 2014. We were just talking about how great that was.” I thought back to 2014, thinking about the faces around that table, trying to recall the class roster. Nothing. There wasn't even a faint glimmer of recognition. “Well, say hello from me,” I texted back, “and please don't say that I couldn't remember.”

It was a small thing, but it haunted me. Here was somebody with whom I had had conversations, apparently, and whose words I had read, who I had seen weekly during a span of four months. But my brain hadn't recorded the experience, at least not deeply, and so it was expunged from my mind, as if those things had never happened.

No doubt you've experienced something similar along the way. A dropped name, a forgotten event, zero recall of a book or a film once seen: these things happen, and with greater frequency as we age. But then sometimes that pattern accelerates: spouses or parents or grandparents - or sometimes we ourselves - who little by little experience the decline of memory, to the point that we no longer remember our loved ones, to the point that we no longer remember ourselves. It is a part of my own family history, and perhaps it is a part of yours too. Some are more fortunate than others, of course, but even those who reach the end with a perfect memory are still subject to the ultimate erasure of the grave. It is, I'm afraid, an all too human thing - to forget. It is also, let us say it, a fearful thing - to forget. What are we to say about such things?

I wish to approach the topic of memory and forgetting from several different angles this morning, and I may take it up in successive weeks as well. I wish to approach it pastorally first of all, for I recognize that memory loss is something that affects all of us to one degree or another, though some of us experience it more acutely, whether in ourselves or with those we love. But I also wish to touch on collective memory loss. I'm interested in what happens to a society when those who experienced an important event at first hand begin to pass away, and with them the ability to recall an event directly. What happens when the last survivors of the

Holocaust pass away, or when no one is alive anymore who remembers the Great Depression, or when there is no one left who can recall what it was like before the Civil Rights Movement? What happens to our collective, social memory when all those we depended upon to remember are gone?

Perhaps the best way to begin our reflections is to notice how memory is a theme that the Bible - that God and Jesus - seem positively obsessed with. Remember, the Bible implores, over and over again. Remember the days of old, the ancient Hebrews are told, meaning the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Do not forget the things your eyes have seen - make them known to your children, those same Hebrews are told; Remember this day, the day you came out of Egypt, Moses says in Exodus (chapter 13); Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy, we find in the Ten Commandments; I will remember the deeds of the Lord, says the Psalmist (Psalm 77); Remember the law of my servant Moses, we read in the prophets (Malachi 4:4); Do this in remembrance of me, Jesus says; Remember me when you come into your kingdom, the crucified thief pleads with Jesus. "Remember" is a refrain that sounds again and again throughout Scripture, like a melodic phrase scattered throughout a long symphony, like a bass drum marking the beat, keeping the time, in the long parade of history.

Surely that's because, as a species, we're prone to forget. How often have we had powerful experiences that we say are life changing - on a journey, say - only to forget about them little by little as the weeks and months pass? How often have we learned a lesson from a painful personal failure, only to find ourselves confronting that same pattern or behavior in ourselves years later? How often have we had an experience of God - where we have felt somehow loved and held as if by a divine embrace, only to later find ourselves bored and frustrated by our lives? How often have we resolved to change - to love and forgive more, to hurt and accuse less - only to forget our intentions in the crucible of new conflicts? Surely, we are a people prone to forget, and so we need reminders, and assistance, in order to remember well.

Scripture seems to know that about lives. God seems to know that memory can be like a sand sculpture on a beach, eroded by the waves of time - thus the injunction to remember and repeat often what is most important. Jesus too seems to recognize how easily we forget. Graciously, humanely, he institutes a kind of mechanism for the preservation of memory. That memory mechanism is contained in a ritual, something he learned from the Hebrew Scriptures - a shared meal with friends, repeated often, using words and songs to recall the most basic things of all: the story of who we are before God, the story of who we are before one another, the feeling of being held and contained by a love greater than us all.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain, I often conducted Sunday services in the memory unit of the hospital - a challenge to be sure. Research suggests that rituals learned over time, together with music, familiar words, and sensory experiences of taste and touch can help to call forth that part of the self that seems to be slipping away. It's what families are often counseled to do as memory loss becomes pronounced in an aging parent or spouse - to exercise patience and care

while offering simple ways to recover those parts of the self that still do remember. And so usually I would read a familiar Psalm. We would listen to an old hymn. We had little pieces of bread to eat, and some juice to drink. I would tell the story of Jesus breaking the bread and giving the cup. And often, miraculously, a number of people would light up, as they recognized, all over again, a song they had learned as a child, a phrase they had turned to in a time of trouble, the taste of something familiar. It was temporary, of course. But I also like to believe that the effect of such moments was somehow lasting, providing a sense of well being that kept going for a while, even if the specific memory faded.

Whether in a personal, familial sense, or in the way it's accomplished in religion, ritual helps to bind memories, and selves, together. But I'm moved by two further insights that follow from Jesus's treatment of memory. Jesus initiates a process of remembrance whereby a group of people covenant to remember on behalf of one another. Individually, we're prone to forget, but a community can do what can't be done alone. That is, among other things, what a church is. We are those who help one another to remember - to remember the best of who we are as human beings, to remember our obligations before one another, to remember that we are all but fragile creatures of God, in need of help if we are to remember who we are. We see this happening on a smaller scale when spouses or families step in to become the living memory for the one whose memory is failing. It happens with continual reminders and familiar patterns, as others remember on behalf of those who can no longer do it themselves. It's one of the greatest forms of devotion that I see as a minister and as a human being. Memory requires the help of others.

But I am moved by another feature of how the Gospels treat memory. Might it be that even as individually, we need others to remember on our behalf, there is beyond us all a God who remembers and contains us, holding each of us in memory? "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," the thief says to Jesus, giving expression to an improbable and yet persistent dream of humanity. It is as beautiful a prayer as any I know. Re-member me: take all the disparate parts of myself, and of the world, that time has scattered; gather together all the pieces of my soul that I can no longer gather for myself; stitch the pieces up and make me whole once again. Re-member me, O Lord, you who number each grain of sand, you who number the hairs upon each of our heads. Re-member us, O God." Such is the prayer of the crucified thief. Such, perhaps, is our prayer as well. Perhaps it is God who remembers in us, and for us.

I wish to push this in one further direction before I'm through, because there is a public, political dimension to everything we have considered so far. For public memory is also in a period of decline right now. Whether through changes in technology and our intellectual habits, willful erasures, or the inevitable aging of those who remember on our behalf, we are facing what amounts to a crisis in public memory that has brought about a repetition of some of the worst features of the previous century.

Not long ago, I watched a recent film from Brazil that garnered a lot of attention earlier in the year. It was called *I'm Still Here*. It's a difficult and very moving film set during the years of

Brazil's military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 until 1985. It's a chronicle of the Paiva family's journey through those painful years. They are an upper middle class family of seven. Rubens, the father is a congressman who was forcibly removed from office after the military coup, returning to his work as a civil engineer. The family has a lively social and intellectual life - theirs is a home filled with music, books, lively conversation and a constant stream of visitors. One day, Rubens is visited by the police, and is taken in for questioning. The family never hears from him again, and no explanation of his whereabouts was given. The same fate befell hundreds of other individuals, while many more were imprisoned and tortured. Eunice Paiva, the mother, holds the world together for her grieving family, while waging a decades long campaign for the Brazilian government to take responsibility for her husband's death. In 1996, two decades later, that finally happened.

In two successive codas toward the end of the film, we discover the thesis that has been at work all along. First, we watch as Eunice, now in her 70's, has a memory slip while counting some money. It's an apparent glitch. A later scene, shown a few decades later, reveals Eunice with an advanced case of Alzheimer's. And yet, when she sees a news report about her husband's recently reopened case, a moment of awareness takes place, in which she recognizes the subject of the report.

Eunice Paiva's memory loss is, in the film, a metaphor for an amnesiac society, in denial of its past, while heedlessly opening itself to a repetition of the same past it wishes to forget. It's not an accident that even as Eunice Paiva sank into Alzheimer's, a man who would soon become Brazil's president cast parliamentary votes in the name of the military dictatorship, while much of the country began to reflect on those years with nostalgia, and with a selective, amnesiac kind of memory.

Brazil's case is a symptom of a wider phenomenon affecting us all. As memories of the Holocaust have faded, so too have incidents of antisemitic violence, coupled with a new kind of slaughter in Palestine, visited upon a people much of the world has wished to forget. As memories of economic catastrophe have receded, so too have the safeguards to prevent a future meltdown - the dismantling of the Glass-Steagall Act. As the memory of Jim Crow has been erased or suppressed, so too the Civil Rights Act has been picked apart. As the memory of Stonewall and the AIDS crisis have receded, so too have protections for sexual minorities. As memories of the McCarthy era have diminished, so too denunciations of liberal and progressive cultures have risen. As memories of back alley abortion clinics and women confined to the home have vanished, so too the rise of so called trad-wives have become fashionable among the young. We too are fast becoming a country of amnesiacs, willfully forgetting the hard won lessons of our history.

That's why we must take to heart those words of Deuteronomy: do not forget those things your eyes have seen - make them known to your children. Among our many tasks and callings right now, congregations such as ours must be institutions of public memory. We must be those who

reach through the fog of dimly received truths, having the courage to tell deeper and more honest stories, about ourselves and about the world around us. We must have the courage to remember, in a culture that wishes to forget.

In truth, that's something we have attempted to do for a long time. In a world of forced amnesia concerning Indigenous Peoples, and the dispossession of Palestine, and the erasure of the history of African descended peoples here in our town, and throughout the whole Circum-Atlantic world, we have attempted to learn, and to tell, a different set of histories. We have done so in our travels together, something we will shortly have opportunities to continue. In January, we are organizing a small delegation to Palestine, that our friends there might know that they are not forgotten, and that we might not forget as well. And then next August, we'll have an opportunity to travel to the Bahia region of Brazil, as we continue to explore the often suppressed history of the Black Atlantic world together, a memory that is, even now, being actively erased in some quarters. Talk to me if you have interest in either of those journeys. In these and other ways, we seek to overcome the all too human tendency to forget. We seek to be a people of memory, literally re-membering, re-configuring what is too often forgotten or ignored.

It is a fearful thing to forget. It is a fearful thing to sense our own incapacity to remember what we should. Many of us have felt that intimately in our own lives. I do not wish to be glib or simplistic. But neither do I think that everything is destined to be lost. We have one another, to bind up our fragile memories with and for one another. We have a tradition, with a set of rituals, readings and songs, that helps us to recall those things we hold to be most deeply true. We have faith in a God who may, just may, hold us in memory, even amidst the erosions of time. And we have a mandate to work alongside others to create cultures of public memory, and therefore, public ethics.

Do these things, in *remembrance* of me, Jesus says. And so we shall.