

“Memory as Resistance”

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (CEB)

Once you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, ²take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the LORD your God is giving you, and put it in a basket.

Then go to the location the LORD your God selects for his name to reside. ³Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: “I am declaring right now before the LORD my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.”

⁴The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the LORD your God’s altar. ⁵Then you should solemnly state before the LORD your God:

“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. ⁶The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. ⁷So we cried out for help to the LORD, our ancestors’ God. The LORD heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders. ⁹He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, LORD, have given me.”

Set the produce before the LORD your God, bowing down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then celebrate all the good things the LORD your God has done for you and your family—each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.

For forty years, the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness. Now, just days before they at last would enter the Promised Land, Moses gave final instructions. Though he himself would not live to enter the land God had provided, Moses knew that the first days were crucial. “When you enter the land God has promised, before you do anything else, make an offering to God of the first part of the harvest. Tell each other again the story of our people, from Abraham through Joseph, to our days in captivity in Egypt, to God delivering us from slavery and giving us this land of opportunity and hope. Then you can celebrate the arrival in your new home.”

Imagine waiting 40 years to arrive at your destination. What would it feel like to take those first steps across the Jordan River? Picture your first glimpse of the land. How odd it must

feel to know that after years of traveling, you would wake up in the same place the next morning, and the day after that, and the day after that. All the places to explore, the landscape to learn, the sights and the sounds of your new home. *But first, remember and give thanks.*

Deuteronomy is a book of law and instruction, but it is much more than that.

Deuteronomy provides the organizational framework for Israel, outlining in detail the ways they are to keep the covenant God made with them. But it also serves as a powerful reminder of who they are as God's called and set apart people. Chapter 26 begins the section known as *Ki Tavo*, Hebrew for "When you enter." These are the final words of instruction offered by Moses after leading the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness, and to the Promised Land. When we study it today, it reads like ancient history. The entry into Canaan took place around 1220 BCE, more than 3,000 years ago. Our lives are very different from theirs. But that's part of why it is so important for us to remember.

Rabbi Jonathan Cohen describes the text we read this morning as "a bridge between an experience we never had to a ritual that reminds us about what might have been and what could still be. And that's precisely why it is so important to practice covenant."

Most of the people who crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land had no memory of Egypt. They were not alive when the Israelites were slaves, when they crossed the sea pursued by Pharaoh's army, when water first flowed from a rock and manna first descended from heaven. Those who did remember preferred to forget. The past was history. They had arrived. Why revisit the hardships of the past? Enjoy the moment; look toward the future. But were it not for the covenant God made with the people and God's presence to guide them, they would still be slaves in Egypt or wandering the wilderness without a home. They

might not exist at all. They needed to remember that they and this moment were part of a larger story. Their present experience wasn't the only thing that mattered. Without the past, there was no present. And the future was not guaranteed. That's why it was so important to remain in covenant. *Remember and give thanks.*

In 1995, the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, undertook a daunting project – to find a way to grapple with the ravages and vestiges of slavery that still impact American society. Rev. Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood began a series of conversations and presentations that would become a theatrical presentation called The MAAFA Suite: A Healing Journey. Since 2009, the MAAFA has expanded and been revised, shared in cities across the country, including here in Cleveland in 2020 at Olivet Institutional Baptist Church. When current St. Paul senior pastor Rev. Dr. David K. Brawley was asked why we need another story about slavery, he responded, “Because we haven't learned the first one yet.” The church's website describes the challenge and resistance to their work, but how critically important it is:

For years, issues and discussions about slavery and racism were, and still remain, taboo in the African-American community in particular, and the American psyche in general. Our forbearers had so divorced themselves from the pain of remembering, that selective amnesia became second nature. This absence of conscious memory is a major missing link for our individual and collective healing.

An honest reckoning with the past can be painful, but in the words of Dr. Brawley, there is no “authentic reconciliation unless we begin with authentic truth.”¹

This week is the celebration of Thanksgiving in the United States. It's a time of joy and feasting as families and friends gather to eat special food, play games, watch football, and enjoy each other's company. If your family is anything like mine, gatherings inevitably turn to telling

¹ <https://www.spcbc.com/themaafa>

stories, sharing memories that make us laugh and bring us joy. I remember as a child going to my grandmother's house on Thanksgiving. After dinner, my dad and his three siblings and their spouses would gather around the dining room table while the kids occupied ourselves with toys and games. But the laughter from that table always drew us in. My sister and I would squeeze in between the adults or sit on our parents' laps and listen to our aunts and uncles recount their adventures and escapades as kids. Some of the stories we could almost recite, because they were told every time the family got together. Others were new to us... and to Grandma, who would have been in a panic if she'd known then what her kids had been up to.

My mom's side of the family has a reunion every other year, so we get to see at least much of our extended family then. But it's been years since my dad's family gathered around the same table. Some of those people are gone – Grandma, Uncle Bill. I haven't seen some of my cousins since we were teenagers. But their stories still shape me. Jenn and I want our kids to know their family stories, too. We alternate years for Thanksgiving but make a point for them to see their grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins as often as we can. Not just to see them, but to spend time *in conversation*, learning the stories that shape who we are. I pray that you have time this week to share stories with the people you love, too.

Nostalgia can be problematic, though. Our memories can be flawed, rendering things better than they were or omitting less pleasant details, sometimes forgetting those who were left out. Most of the stories shared around those tables are of happy memories. Rarely do we revisit the challenges that hardened our resolve or left us with scars. It isn't helpful to dwell too long on past hurts, but we do a disservice to the past if we gloss over the sadness and focus only on the joy. We can hold both at the same time.

It's true for collective memories, and it's true for individual ones, too. I know that digging into the past can be complicated and even traumatic. If addressing the painful memories you've locked away for self-preservation is something you can't do alone – and for most of us, we cannot – then I encourage you to seek out the help of someone you can trust: a close friend, a professional therapist, or one of your pastors. Rev. Moseng and I are here to help you in any way we can and we hold things in the strictest confidence. *You are not alone.*

Holding both joy and sadness at the same time is something we can learn from our Jewish friends. Every *Shabbat* service includes the instruction to remember, when the *kiddush* cup is shared as a sign of joy. Holidays in the Jewish tradition hold together the power of memory – often painful memories – with times of celebration. Jewish comedian Alan King said that every Jewish holiday can be summarized in three sentences: “They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat.” Think of the Passover Seder. It's a rehearsal of the story of liberation from captivity in Egypt, recalling pain and sadness. But it's also a time of great joy: dancing to Miriam's song, singing *Dayenu*, and finding the *Afikomen*. If you haven't had the opportunity to attend a Seder, I hope you can at some point in your life because there's so much to learn about ourselves and our faith from that celebration. Even the food invites memory and joy: dipping parsley in salt water to symbolize new growth and tears, *haroset* – a mixture of nuts and apples and wine – symbolizes the mortar used to make bricks in Egypt, bitter herbs like horseradish symbolize the bitterness of captivity. Yet they are part of a meal shared in community to celebrate liberation. The Seder reminds us it is possible to be sad and joyful at the same time.

Those celebrations are more than reminders of our past. *They are acts of resistance in a culture that wants us to forget.* The world we live in is focused on living in the moment and

having everything we want, when we want it. The pace of our world does violence to our souls. A relentless pursuit of “the good life” tells us to live in the moment and write our own future. But when we ignore what came before, we forget who we are and dishonor what made the present moment possible. And we put at risk the very future we long to experience. Our sacred scriptures and our practice of faith can help us remember. Practicing memory and gratitude allow us to embrace God’s hope for us. That is the theme of Deuteronomy, a way of keeping covenant grounded in the memory of our shared narrative as God’s people. “Deuteronomy knows that when a people forget their past, they lose their present and their future.”²

In a world obsessed with productivity and instant gratification, keeping Sabbath is an act of resistance. In a world that chases profits and bows at the altar of the free market, worship of the one true God is an act of resistance. In a “me first” world where I am the author of my own future, liturgy is an act of resistance. We reenact God’s story and find our place in it. Not only the feel-good parts, but also sin and repentance, brokenness and lament, getting lost and being found, God’s correction and God’s grace.

In the Christian tradition, we reenact God’s salvation story every Sunday, but particularly at the Communion table. In the language of the church, the celebration of Holy Communion is called the Eucharist, which means *thanksgiving*. We give thanks as we remember what Christ has done for us. We recall the story of the Last Supper, when Jesus broke the bread and poured the wine, saying, “This is my body and my blood, given for you.” He said we should do this often. Why? *To remember*. The Greek word is *anamnesis*. Anamnesis means more than

² Archie Smith, Jr. in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year C, Vol. 3. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (2010), 26.

just memory – it involves bringing the past into the present so that it can shape our future. We *remember* Christ's saving action by receiving the bread and cup that *represent* his body and blood. But we also *re-member* the Body of Christ; we put back together what is broken. The meal *re-presents* Christ; Christ meets us at the table. *Remember and give thanks.*

We're surrounded by influences that want us to forget. *Ignore the past. Tell a happier story. Don't keep bringing up injustice. Accentuate the positive.* But there can be no authentic reconciliation without authentic truth. Memory is an act of resistance. It also keeps us looking forward, inviting us into a future shaped by God's story and our story, to take all we have learned and experienced and carry it with us as we seek God's hope for us. We are reminded that the God who has been our help in ages past is our hope for years to come. So we can offer our doxology to "this bounteous God" who is near us now and throughout our lives. *Remember and give thanks. Amen.*