

Empowered by Memory

Exodus 13:3-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5a

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Have you noticed that the older you get the more readily memories come to mind of events that happened far in the past, perhaps decades ago? But it is increasingly difficult to recall what happened a week, an hour, or even a moment ago?

Have you ever had the experience of running up the stairs in your home or into another part of the house to retrieve something, and when you arrive at the doorway of that room, you do not have a clue as to why you are there?

In that event there is only one reliable method for recalling. That is going back down the stairs or back to the room that you started in, with hope it will pop back into your mind. I find that little trick works for me about seventy percent of the time.

I have pretty much given up on remembering where I have left my reading glasses. Now I just buy three to four inexpensive pair from the drug store and keep them scattered in the office and at home. Those drug store glasses do not look so fashionable, but usually there is a pair sitting around somewhere, and they double as a play toy for the kids. They can put them on and play “serious-looking Daddy.”

Or have you ever forgotten something and then tried to convince yourself, “Well, if it is really important, I will remember”? But that is not always true. Sometimes you remember and sometimes you don’t.

Memories, those we hold and those we lose, play a big role in our lives, not only for how we get through the day, but also in shaping our perceptions of ourselves and each other, and ultimately how we think about God and how we think about our faith. How and when we remember what God has done in our lives, far in the past or just a moment ago, is our topic for this morning.

Let us pray: Lord and Father of us all, make this a time when we remember you and your covenant with us through Jesus Christ. Help us recall your faithfulness to us through him, and move us, we pray, by the power of your Spirit, to live in your covenant with us every day. Amen.

Memory can be defined as our “conscious or unconscious evocation of things past.” Such evocation of things past, according to Scripture, is quite important to our faith.

Nowhere in Scripture is there an academic definition of memory or a treatise on its utility. But there is a whole lot of recalling events from the past in Scripture, specifically those events in which God acted in a strong way to redeem or save his people from trouble.

One defining event from the Bible that is remembered throughout the Old Testament and into the New is Israel’s exodus from Egypt. The story of this historical event remains at the center of our faith, and has taken on added meaning as new chapters of our faith have been written over the centuries.

To the present, Israel’s release from bondage remains an important template for our Christian understanding of our release, by the power of Christ, from the oppressive powers of sin and death. Israel’s passage through the waters of the Red Sea, at the raising of Moses’ staff, has become an important scriptural framework for understanding our own passage through the waters of baptism, as we leave one way of life and enter into a new way of life in Christ’s name. We are delivered by the hand of God to a new kind of kingdom, flowing not only with milk and honey, but with the very grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

In our passage from Exodus 13, we find the tribe of Israel just at the beginning of their departure from Egypt. They left in a hurry from Rameses, and now they're camped at Succoth. It is here in this place that they receive instruction from Moses to observe a seven-day feast of unleavened bread. The bread is not mixed with yeast, because there was no time for it to rise in the hurry of their departure. This is what Hebrew children are reminded of at every Passover meal.

Moses says in verse nine, "this will be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes that the law of the Lord will be in your mouth, for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt."

Do you notice all the language of the body in that passage: a sign on your hand, a memorial between your eyes, the law in your mouth, deliverance by a strong hand of the Lord? All this language of the body says that our faith is lived not only through our hearts and minds, but through our bodies as well. Or as one commentator puts it, "the body is pressed into the service of memory."

To put it even more simply, our faith is not just a head trip. No, our faith draws us fully into observance with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength.

I remember years ago when I began in pastoral ministry, I confessed to a seasoned pastor that when I visited someone in a time of trouble, I did not always know the right words to say. Sometimes their troubles seemed too big for my small words to have any comfort at all. And he reminded me, "Yes indeed, many troubles are too big for your words to comfort or solve; but never underestimate the significance of you simply showing up. Being physically present in the time of their trouble speaks of God's love for the person you seek to comfort."

And indeed, there have been times when I have been sick or in trouble, and friends have drawn near, and it did not matter what they said in that moment. They were there. I was literally not alone. In that moment I was reminded that I worship a God called Immanuel, God with us.

Have you had such an experience, where the touch of a hand, a listening ear, a steady arm helping you into a chair or bed, spoke to you of God's grace and specific care for you as his child?

I think of that pastor's advice whenever I hear or speak Jesus' words in communion, "Do this in remembrance of me." This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Jesus understood that faith is also deeply physical. He understood it to his death, as his body suffered on that cross.

His body is pressed into the service of memory.

Through so many rituals of our faith we are engaged in physical enactments of what we stand for, what we believe. In the remembering we are renewed in our covenant with God, generation after generation. We are renewed in our very identity as people redeemed by the power of Jesus' cross and resurrection.

It is through our ritual, liturgical actions that we are pressed into faithful action in the world. In the kneeling, we are humbled in service to each other. In the standing to recite the creed, we are reinforced in standing up for the truth of the Gospel when we are surrounded by lies. In fasting, we remember we do not live by bread alone. In breaking bread and drinking from the cup, we acknowledge how our wholeness in Christ came through the price of his broken body.

And when our own bodies are broken, we experience the gift of a God who understands our suffering fully because his body endured the worst kind of punishment. "Why, O God, have you forsaken me?" he said from the cross. We live out our faith in this world, and we experience deliverance, as our passage says, "by the strong hand of God!" God's strength is made perfect in our own weakness.

Last Sunday after services, I had a young boy ask me, "Did you do that BATH-tism in worship this morning?" I was tempted to correct his terminology. But I realized in that moment, he was connecting the water from the font with his Saturday evening bath, one of the more pleasurable and playful experiences for a little boy. I remember playing battleship with the soap floating in the water, don't you?

And I said, “Yes, I did those bath-tisms! Aren’t bath-tisms great?” “Yeah,” he said, “really great!”

Out of the bath and into God’s kingdom! That is my kind of exodus! I do not think I will ever conduct a baptism again without thinking of that little boy who helped me remember the meaning of the sacrament.

So many times in ministry I have been impressed by how, in moments of forgetfulness, the Body of Christ helps its own members when they forget who they are, to whom they belong, what they are about. We do that for each other as members of the Body.

I know a man whose elderly mother, a long-time member of the church, developed severe dementia in her old age. Eventually, it was impossible for her to recognize her own son when he came to the nursing home to visit. One day, when he was at a loss for what to do as she just sat staring at the wall and not reacting to anything he said to her, he saw a hymnal in the corner of the common room, near the piano.

Even though he was not much of a singer, he picked it up and turned to the songs he found and remembered, the ones she had taught him in the pew on countless Sunday mornings in his childhood, the hymns she sang all her life. Sometimes what the mind forgets, the lips, the hands, the feet remember. And God smiles back when we smile at God through song.

The body is pressed into the service of memory, memory of God’s goodness in our lives. It is the Body of Christ who reminds us who we are and what we are called to do.

For the past year I have been involved in a 7:15 a.m. small group Bible study every Wednesday morning in my office. I have to tell you, on those dark, cold winter mornings, rousing myself out of bed to be physically present in my office for that conversation has not always been easy.

But I can tell you, every Wednesday morning, when the men that I have studied Scripture and prayed with leave my office, I thank God because by their presence they have reminded me who I am, whom I serve, and why I do what I do. Their physical presence at that “unholy hour of the morning” has been a HOLY experience for me, and reminds me of this congregation’s commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Just like you in your work or calling, there are moments when I forget who I am, and why I do what I do. But the members of Christ’s Body, indeed all of us in this church, remind each other why we are here and what we are about and who we are to God. All the members of his Body are pressed into the service of memory.

What does Paul write to the Thessalonians? “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Just a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated sixty years of ministry as The National Presbyterian Church, a history that reaches for even more decades before that designation. For decades before that designation there were congregations of believers who were recalling the mighty acts of God and proclaiming the gospel in this city.

Through the physical and spiritual efforts of countless members and staff, we remembered on that anniversary and celebrated God’s work in and through this congregation for generations: past, present, and future. Through such remembrance, by taking notice of what God has done in the past, we take notice of what God is still doing, and will keep on doing through those who love him. He reminds us through each other, through the members of the Body, that we are called in service to his Son.

Let us pray: Lord, you have been faithful to us for generations. May we, in this generation of your followers, always remember how you have delivered us from the power of sin and death and how you have equipped us to serve in Jesus’ name. Amen.