



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Story and Struggle

September 15, 2019

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 32:1-5, Exodus 32:7-14

SERMON The Rev. Brent Damrow “Struggling & Remembering”

Memory and story – they are for people of faith an act of responsibility. But even more than that, they are an act of possibility. Memory and story help us both individually and collectively, not only to hold on to our best selves, but to become our even better selves. On an individual level, when we are pressed in from all sides, when we are tempted to make those decisions that go against our upbringing, against our moral foundations, against what we know is the better way, it is the community that can remind us of our journey. When age makes memory become less reliable, it is the community who can remind us who we are.

The great hymn, “Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant,” puts this idea this way: “I will hold the Christ-light for you in the shadow of your fear. I will hold my hand out to you and speak the peace you long to hear.” Story and memory don’t just tell us who we are and where we’ve been, but rather to whom we belong, and even more importantly, where we might yet go. In those pivotal moments, those crossroads of life kinds of moments, where crucial decisions hang in the balance, when decisions of impact are about to be made by those we love, we would be well advised to offer them what everyone needs most in those pivotal moments – memory and story.

In this particular story that Gary read for you this morning, the people are in the middle of the great Exodus, the great flight from Egypt to the promised land. And we remember that this whole trip, this whole flight, this whole exodus, in fact began with a moment of forgetting. In the very beginning of the book of Exodus are these words: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not remember Joseph.” That king, the Bible tells us, did not remember Joseph and all of God’s blessings that led to such prosperity and abundance for the land of Egypt. That forgetting of that ancient story broke the relationship between Egyptian and Israelite, turning the former into master and the latter into slave, when for centuries they had existed side by side to the benefit of the other. It is in the story that Gary read memory and story that Moses clings to in this critical moment where the future of all of God’s people hangs in the balance. In that moment when God’s wrath was kindled, in that moment when we hear God say a most un-Godlike thing: “Moses, I’m going to keep my promise to you. Of you I will make a great nation. But these people (these people of yours,

notice God says), why don't I just wipe them all out, and we can start over again." In the midst of God's proclamation, Moses did what he could do, and that was to offer God story and memory. It is part of a deep tradition in Hebrew Scripture that memory and story are not evoked in the past tense, but rather in the present tense, that there might be a future at all. And that is the power of both story and memory.

Walter Brueggeman makes this astonishing claim, that memory is not a tool of the status quo, but rather, memory is the very seed of imagination. We are called, you see, always to draw upon the health-giving memory of our story of faith, our journey, our ongoing relationship with God, and yes, equally importantly, our wrestling with our faith, with our journey. And yes even with God, too. Memory is no act of mere nostalgia in the Bible, no hold on what was good or what was even great. But rather memory is a source of courage for the future. It is not a tool to fit our realism or to conform to our interests. Instead, we invite this idea of memory and story into the present, so that the present might be radically reconstituted, that it might be radically changed, and that impossible new beginnings might be glimpsed even where nothing but dead ends seem to exist. That whatever seems so pressing, so broken, so inevitable, is instead broken up by an alternative future.

I don't know if you remember the story of Exodus. But if you do, you know this: Boy did those people wandering in the wilderness need a new beginning. They needed an alternative future. Do you remember? They had been stuck in this endless loop of impatience, of hunger and thirst, wandering not just for 40 days but for 40 years, longing for a place to call home, longing for some rest from the seemingly endless journey. And if you remember, each time, each chapter, virtually every verse, the people are doing what we do in times like that. They were whining, they were complaining. They were tempted to look back to their lives in Egypt for the good things that were there, the meager food they were allowed, the rest that they got, forgetting the fact that they were slaves in that land of Egypt.

And each time in the Bible, if you read through Exodus, here's what you will discover. Each time, God responds with grace. Bitter water suddenly turning sweet, manna raining down from heaven, quails wandering in the desert. And each time after each of these miracles, both Moses and God proclaimed: Surely now the people will remember that God is with us, that things are good, that the future has possibility. After one battle where the people of God were delivered from a hopelessly large enemy, God finally said to Moses, You know what? Write this down in a book. These people, they keep forgetting. Write this down in a book that they might not forget that this too is part of your story, that deliverance is not just a one time act out of a one time place like Egypt, but it's deliverance in each and every battle we find ourselves in every day. Over and over again in the relationship, God reminds the people of their story past to inform their present struggle and to expand their future imagination.

In the Jewish tradition of the Passover Haggadah, people are obligated not just to remember the deliverance from Egypt, but to see themselves as being personally delivered from Egypt, that they might not just remember the story, but embody it. That they might not just see a new future for others, but also live into one for themselves. God commanding us to remember our story now and for this very moment. It is beautiful that in this very moment it is God who seems to be the one who has forgotten the way. The tables are turned. And here Moses invokes the very story, using the exact same words that drew God's attention to the people's plight in Egypt in the first place. He uses the exact same words that God through an angel said to

Moses, to call him to do something as crazy as to go to the Pharaoh, the most powerful person in the whole world, and say “Let my people go.”

Of all the people to suddenly side with the people of Israel, Moses is an unlikely one. He has been dealing with their whining and complaining for this entire journey. And when he is presented with the opportunity, the temptation with God saying “I’m going to give you another people. Why don’t you just let these people go?” It is Moses instead who says nope, these are the ones. Because Moses knew his story, he knew the memory of the people. And so for the sake of the moment, he reimagined a future for these people who had demonstrated time and time again that they knew only one thing. But I think it makes perfect sense. Because you see these people, this wandering band, had become a family during their travails in the wilderness, the relationship drawing tighter and tighter with each step. And so Moses, the Bible tells us, argues with God. Moses is the one who says to God what God has been saying to the people all along: “God, remember the story. Remember the story of Abraham, remember the story of Isaac, remember the story of Jacob.”

Then come the words that bring some people great joy and other people significant stress. This statement: And God changed God’s mind about what God had decided to do. This passage of God forgetting, of God changing, in my experience freaks many people out, because in this changing world of ours, this unstable world of ours, the Christian church has moved more and more into presenting God as this unchanging entity, the one thing that does not change in the world. As the hymn “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” puts it, “We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish. But naught changeth thee.” But I think that this passage is about far less the nature of God, and far more about the truth that we are in relationship with God. And I’ve got to be honest with you, it is awfully hard to be in relationship with a brick wall, is it not? If God never changes, if God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, it is awfully hard to draw into God’s loving arms waiting to enfold us.

What is at stake, in this story and this memory is a God who feels our pain, who hears our cries, and who is moved with compassion, and yet with whom we must, like all relationships, struggle and wrestle. Just like Jacob, who was renamed Israel, did. The founding message, Israel, struggle with your God. For to not wrestle is to indeed settle for the status quo rather than the liberating possibility that comes with each breath.

I don’t know what endless loop you might be caught in, where the status quo of life is making you want to hunker down or go back to some way of being that may allow for survival but not thriving. But on this day, whatever that loop is, remember this story of how even when life becomes a collective train wreck of epic proportions, like happened there on the plains, that God is not absent. God is never defeated. God is still, in our tradition, speaking, and absolutely still working. Remember the story.

Do you remember Mary, the mother of Jesus? When an angel came to her to tell her that she was going to bear the savior of the whole world? When he told her that in her loving arms and care would be the one who would redeem the whole world? Do you remember what Mary did? She sang. But what she sang is even more important. She didn’t sing her own song, she sang Hannah’s song, what we now know as the Magnificat. She drew on the story and memory of her past, knowing that for Hannah something that was so scary, Hannah managed, just as Mary would, too. Story breaking into the present to make a future.

And I don't know where your relationship with God is at this moment, whether you are in sync, whether you are wrestling, or whether you are wondering where God is at all. But I'm here to tell you that if you read the stories of great people of faith, contemporary heroes like Henri Nouwen or Mother Teresa, and so many others, they will tell you that, unlike the hymn, their lives did not go on as endless songs above earth's lamentations. Rather, their lives were always a never ending wrestling match with God, where at times God seemed to slip through their fingers, where God seemed so far away, or like this passage where God seemed to even stand in their way, where it seemed like God had indeed forsaken them.

If you look in our hymnals, you will find hymn after hymn after hymn after hymn about remembering the story. There are dozens of them. But when I wanted to look for a hymn about wrestling with God, really wrestling with God, really challenging God, really looking for a way through the struggle of what feels so wrong, I started with this hymnal, went through every single hymn, didn't find one. Picked up another hymnal, went through every single hymn, didn't find one. Even found this brand new hymnal, "Hymns of Truth and Light," didn't find a single one. Every single hymn, not so much about wrestling with God, but instead they were reassuring, leaning on God, letting God choose your path, trusting God to guide you. And yet, when I read this story about how God wanted to kill them all, that didn't seem to be quite appropriate as a way to sing. It's not to say that those things aren't true, but rather to remind us that we are in the story, that we are in relationship with God, and sometimes that requires struggle.

So the hymn we are going to sing reminds us of that very struggle. And I hope it reminds us even more of the one who uttered the very words of this hymn, when the whole world seemed like a train wreck of epic proportions. When he hung on the cross and only one possible ending could be imagined, Jesus evoked the words you are about to sing, and he didn't make them up. He clung to an old story out of the psalms, Psalm 22. He clung to the whole story, that what seemed so pressing, so broken, so inevitable, was broken up by an alternative future. And we know how it all turned out. Friends, hold to the story, wrestle with God. And now let us join our voice to Jesus's, and our story to this never ending love story of God and the people, of our past, our present, and absolutely our future. Will you rise to your feet and sing the ancient words of Psalm 22, "Lord, why have You forsaken me?"

HYMN 168:

Lord, why have You forsaken me, and why are You so far away from my complaint and my distress poured out before You night and day? Yet You are holy, and the songs of praise of Israel are Your throne; when our ancestors called on You, You saved them, rescued all Your own. But I am mocked and put to scorn, all those who see me laugh and say, "You trust in God, so let us see the help of God to whom you pray." Yet You, O Lord, have been my God and only hope since I was born; trouble is near me, none can help; my Savior, leave me not forlorn



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