

September 29, 2024

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Remembering God's Mercies

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-13; 13:1-8

There was a price paid, and it was a gruesome one indeed. It is part of the bitter sweet story of Passover. The promise was not just of freedom for the captives, but also judgment on the captors.”³ When we remember that, too, we’re invited to consider our own involvement, however unwitting, in the oppression of others. Do we only see ourselves in the grateful role of the Hebrews when we remember this story? For a moment, would seeing ourselves in the role of the Egyptians call us to take stock of how we are treating other people through our actions and inactions?

God told Moses to make sure the people remember this day, and remember it in this way. Much later, Jesus held up a loaf of bread and told us, “do this in remembrance of me.” When we come to the communion table we remember Jesus and the costly sacrifice he made, committing himself to freedom and salvation, just like the lamb in the Passover story offered. The *how* of our communion matters, too. We come to the table together, to remember collectively. And we eat and drink together, in the present. Jesus’ admonition to remember, and I think the one to Moses, too, was not so that we would stay focused on the past. It was so that we would be transformed now, and into the future. Communion is an already-but-not-yet event that points toward a future where we will one day all sit side by side at God’s table in the kingdom of heaven.

Like riding a bike, the memory itself of God’s mercy, instilled in us from the beginning, will stick in our muscles for a lifetime, no matter what. And we’re thankful that that truth never goes away. But we are not seeking to be tepid followers of Jesus who only know that truth by rote. We are seeking to become active, faithful disciples of Christ who know God’s mercy in our hearts and bodies and who live it out every day. And so we seek to build strong memories of God’s compassion by encountering those stories often and together. We commit to ask deep questions about the stories, unafraid of complexities because God’s goodness will not falter in the face of them. And as we do that, we trust that our remembering will filter out into our hands and feet as we serve our neighbors, and love those who are hard to love, and lean into hope even in challenging times. God’s mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. May we remember that good news in our hearts, and live it out through our hands and feet and lips.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 171.

2 Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 174.

3 *Spill the Beans: Worship and Learning Resources for All Ages*, Issue 20, October 2, 20216, Spill the Beans Resource Team, 2016, 33.

I can ride a bicycle. But I’m not very good at it. When I was five, my parents took me and my bike to the blacktop at my primary school, outfitted with a helmet and Velcro knee pads. I wasn’t allowed any training wheels. And I did it; I learned to ride! But where I grew up in Virginia, there were no sidewalks, so you couldn’t practice by just riding around the neighborhood any old time. And there were hills everywhere, so it was tough for a little kid to navigate. So since those days of learning how, I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve ridden a bike. Maybe that saying about remembering is true: “it’s like riding a bicycle.” Once you know how to do something, you always remember. But I am here to say, that, without enough practice, it’s hard for that thing to hold much meaning in our lives.

The story of the Passover is about remembering. Even as the events of the meal and the passover were taking place for the first time, these scriptures are already focused on the memory of them. From the start, God was telling the people how to go about remembering what happened in the years to come. “Remember that day.” “You shall tell your child about that day.” They were to remember how God acted in a decisive way on behalf of people who were suffering as slaves. They were to remember God’s ultimate commitment to their freedom. Remembering the Passover has shaped the life of God’s people since the time it happened. For us, this story is about remembering the merciful acts of God; remembering the powerful ways God has led people out of afflictions many times before.

God’s instruction to Moses was about both the *importance* of remembering and about *how* to remember. We’ll focus on the importance part first. A lot of what we do in worship, or Bible study or Sunday school is about remembering. We read the Bible stories, we sing the hymns, we affirm our faith to remind us what the bigger story of God really is. As author Cole Arthur Riley says, “The answers to the biggest questions about identity, story, and God can only be answered in relation to memory. Without memory, we are forced to rely solely on ideas and suggestions to make sense of who we are, as opposed to the concrete.”¹

By reading the Bible, we learn the concrete ways God has acted mercifully, time and again. We are trying to put into our memories the ways God has saved people in the past—from evil, from harm, from illness, from themselves. When my youngest daughter was teeny-tiny, she wanted us to read a short little book called *Baby Moses* over and over again. I know, Pastor’s Kid, right!? Over and over, we read about God sheltering baby Moses in the reeds at the river; about God working through Pharaoh’s own daughter to save Moses. There was my little girl, wanting to remember God’s merciful acts, before she was even two years old. This summer, after Vacation Bible School, I asked my older daughter what Bible story they had read that day. She groaned at me and said it was Jonah and the big fish. I told her I loved that story. And she said, “I’ve heard that story so many times!” At just age 9, apparently, she is like Jonah herself, tired already of hearing about God’s great mercy! But in their own ways, without even realizing it, my daughters are reminding us how this remembering thing works. We have to come to hear these same stories again and again: creation, flood, exodus, passover, the promised land, the exile, the birth of Jesus, the parables, the crucifixion, the resurrection. When we encounter these formative stories we start to fill our memories with the ways God has mercifully saved God’s people, over and over.

And when we remember those stories, we can weave God’s story into our own stories. So that we remember God’s merciful acts in our own lives: when God helped us get through those events we weren’t sure we could survive on our own; when God’s love reached us at our lowest point; when God helped us figure out the way forward in a confusing time; when God’s Spirit comforted us through deepest grief. The memory of God’s compassion helps us know ourselves as people who will again be visited by God’s mercy in our current struggles. Now, our stories are complicated, too, just like the Passover story is with freedom and death, promise and judgment all bound up together. But when our memories are filled with the knowledge of God’s mercy, that helps us trust in God at work in the present, helping to save and to free us, or maybe helping to save and free the people around us.

This kind of remembering, which affects the present, is not something we do alone. We do it together in this beloved community in which God has placed us. As Arthur Riley writes, “I think the whole Bible is predicated on collective remembrance.... Collective memory requires that we piece together the fragments of individual memory and behold something not necessarily larger but with greater depth and color.”² Talking about Moses or Jonah or Jesus’ birth together with other people, puts us in touch with God’s goodness in a fuller way than it does to think about those stories on

our own. Feeling the music reverberate in our chests in this room together makes us feel the power of God differently than listening to a song on the radio does. Remembering God’s mercy together helps us to say something like in Exodus, “it is because of what the Lord has done for us, that we can trust in God today.”

It is good to remember all that God has done. But *how* do we build that memory so that it more than just sticks? So that it actually becomes a part of our identity, a part of how we view ourselves? To think about the bike metaphor, how do we become not just people who can sort of ride a bike, but out and out cyclists.

In teaching the Hebrews how to remember Passover, God told Moses that remembering wasn’t only a head thing, it was a hands and feet, tongue and tasting, bodily event. To really remember the meaning of the event, they needed to reenact and experience God’s mercy for themselves, often. Eventually, out of that instruction, the Jewish tradition of the Passover Seder meal developed. In our area, where there are many Jewish residents, some of us may have had opportunities to participate in the kind of remembering that’s done at a modern Passover meal. Maybe you’ve been invited to a friends’ home to celebrate it? The table features certain foods to see with your eyes and put on your tongue, which are symbolic of the covenant people’s story: matzoh, or unleavened bread, which reminds them how the people ate their food hurriedly; a shank bone or roasted meat, which reminds them of the lamb whose blood marked the doorposts; bitter herbs, like horseradish, in memory of the terrible time of enslavement; and charoset, the mixture of apples, nuts, and wine that symbolizes the mortar and bricks they were forced to make as slaves. Throughout the meal, they read ancient texts, ask questions and discuss with the children; they offer blessings and prayers. The meal and the experience makes the memory of what God did at Passover into something present right now that people can touch and feel and encounter. It’s a way for people who never experienced that original event in the land of Egypt, still to remember it and make it a part of themselves. Remembering in this way urges people into the future, to live with this story in their hearts and minds and bones.

How we remember is also shaped by our modern understanding of our interconnected world. When we read stories, even ones that contain the word of God, it’s helpful to ask who told them, and why? Whose stories are not told and why might that matter? As one commentary says, “Needless to say, there is a horrific side to this [Passover] story as one recounts the striking down of the firstborn sons in the land of Egypt in the houses that weren’t passed over by a God bringing judgment on the [en]slavers.