



**THE POWER OF MEMORY**  
**Joshua 4:1-8**  
**I Peter 2:4-10**

In the delightfully funny off Broadway play “**Nunsense**,” one of the main characters is Sister Mary Amnesia who arrives at the convent in her habit without a clue to her identity remembering only that a large crucifix has fallen on her head. The Reverend Mother in the play once states about Sister Mary Amnesia that she is unfortunately a beautiful building with nobody home. Towards the end of the play, Sister Mary Amnesia, while singing, remembers her name and her identity and further discovers that she has won the Reader’s Digest Sweepstakes. To lose one’s memory and identity is a very upsetting experience.

One of the most difficult things in my own life was to see my father slowly die from Alzheimer’s disease. When he no longer knew who my mother was it was a crushing blow.

According to the many psychology books I was required to read in my undergraduate training – all generally accept that memory is a powerful force. It connects us to the past, present, and future.

Tomorrow, at our church cemetery we will celebrate and observe Memorial Day. What memories will these public and private rituals keep alive? What does the word ‘memory’ or ‘Memorial Day’ mean to you? What emotions and feelings are stirred in your soul and spirit – as you reflect on this part of our religious and national character?

For a word to mean something there must be many things it cannot mean. Words only have meaning when there are some things it does not and will not do.

Is Memorial Day only another opportunity for Democrats and Republicans to bash each other and blame the woes of our nation on each other?

What is the memory of the past you are passing onto your children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews? What is so important to you – that you want to be a living memory of that truth or ideal?

In the Broadway musical “**Cats**” the most moving part of the musical is when the “**Memories**” is sung.

The late Bob Hope always ended his U.S.O. shows with the words, “**Thanks for the memories.**” Are we really? What memories are you thankful for today?

How many times in the past 2 months have we heard it said that the current war in Iraq is a painful reminder of the truth and reality of the Vietnam War era?

Today, we began our worship service with the famous hymn of Isaac Watts, “**O God, Our Help in Ages Past, Our hope for years to come.**” The songwriter expresses the faith community’s memory of the past activity of God’s presence, in its journey of faith.

He then reminds us that the same God who was active and present then is still quite alive now. We sing “Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.” Our God is alive.

### **FIRST, WE ARE WHOM AND WHAT WE REMEMBER.**

While the past defers to the present moment and to the future, it refuses to be discarded. Only those who know they are heirs, are qualified to be new pioneers in order to claim an inheritance which is undefiled.” Jesus has gone on before us. We can’t claim – what isn’t already there.

In John Steinbeck’s’ great writing, “The grapes of Wrath” a migrating ‘Okie” family is told not to waste vital packing space on photographs, and other items of family history and memories. One of the family members responds. “How will we know it’s us – without our past?” Every time Mary and I have moved – one of the first things we do is to get the pictures up on the wall. I get my credentials up in my new pastor’s office reminding me of my role and identity in this new setting.

The role of memory can be so valuable in the development of our spiritual life. If you remember nothing else about this sermon – remember that fact.

However, memory also can be a very hard taskmaster – if we only choose to remember that which is hard, painful and morbid. Maybe it is too simplistic to say a person is what they think, or eat, or read – but to say a person is what they remember gets mighty close to the truth.

In the Old Testament book of **Exodus 13:19**, it says that before Moses leads the people to the Promised Land, they must first dig up the grave of Joseph and take his bones with them on the journey. They must not lose their identity as a people.

Anyone who can’t remember history back beyond his or her own birth is an orphan. To be a Christian is to be enrolled and a participant in an ongoing story with God and those claimed by him.<sup>1</sup> Emperors and monarchs of old understood that people who are detached, rootless, and history-less are much easier managed and easily controlled than people who have names, stories, and a home.<sup>2</sup>

Names and places like Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Calvary, Calvin, Luther, and Wesley mean something to us in our religious memory. Places like Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Ellis Island, Flanders's Field, the beaches of Normandy, Philadelphia, and Arlington Cemetery mean something to us.

## **SECONDLY, THE POWER OF MEMORY INVITES US TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT.**

Our great text from Joshua today reminds us that we are participants in the great company of saints that reaches far back into the rich soil of the past to provide hope and inspiration for us to step forward into the future to build the kingdom of God in our midst. We are not the first generation of God's faithful community who struggles to be the body of Christ in a world that is deeply divided and full of strife and envy and in need of the vision and hope that God has entrusted to us to preach and live.

As Eugene H. Peterson shares: "this passage – along with others – prevents the church from having a bad case of chronological snobbery – the assumption that our ancestors have nothing to teach us and no wisdom to shed on our path."

The prophet Jeremiah pleaded with his people "stand at the crossroads and look, ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls."<sup>3</sup>

To cross over the river Jordan – to step into the future – required a certainty of God's direction and action. It required a deep commitment to cross over into an unknown future armed with nothing but the spoken promises of God. However, that is exactly what our ancestors did – and we are called to follow therein.

It was by the Lord's miraculous intervention that the nation of Israel crossed the Jordan and entered into the Promised Land. So it is the Lord's intervention that will allow us to build the kingdom of God in our world, of which EUM is a vital link.

So today in our national and religious life we stand on the giant shoulders of those who have gone on before us. Their witness invites our response as well.

## **THIRDLY, THE RICH SOIL OF THE PAST INSPIRES US FORWARD TO LIVE FAITHFULLY NOW.**

The church of Jesus Christ is not a museum, but a mission launching pad. Once we have been nurtured on who we are, what we are, and whose we are, we then launch out by raising up our sail and allowing the wind of God to carry us to our next destination in the journey. The fertile soil of the past allows us to dream dreams – and claim the vision in our own time.

This beautiful edifice and mission station is supported and buttressed by a firm foundation. However, as great as the skilled builders and architects designed this

structure to be secure – we have an even firmer and greater foundation – that which is Jesus Christ our Lord. The very stone that was rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

Martin Niemoeller was a clergyman who spent seven years in a concentration camp at Dachau. Upon his release, he held a press conference. One of the newspaper reporters went away in total disgust saying, “To think after seven years in a concentration camp and all he can talk about is Jesus Christ!” Niemoeller replied, “What else is there to talk about? If it had not been for the presence and power of Jesus Christ, I would never have found the strength to survive for seven years.” His faith was active – alive – ongoing.

As the men and women of years ago met the storm clouds, the dark shadows, towering mountains, the Hitlers, the Pharaohs, the Caesars with a deep abiding faith in God, so the memory of their faith and response demands a response as well.

Only when our past reaches forward can it deliver us from our own self-centeredness when it connects us with the sacred story of the community’s story. This story then enlarges our vision and enriches our understanding. Dr. Fosdick captured this thought when he wrote these words: “God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power; crown thine ancient church’s story, bring her bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour, for the facing of this hour.”

We come today not to pay respect to a dead nation or a dead Savior, but for us to be living reminders of the truths that these two great institutions instruct us in and to do our part in keeping their messages alive.

As I have shared with you before – it is a great privilege and honor to be a citizen of the United States of America. My greatest joy, however, is by the grace of God to be a born again believer – to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior – and to be a citizen of an even great kingdom, which he has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races. I believe, work, and labor for – and long to live in someday – “The Holy City” which Laurie so beautifully reminded us of today.

In closing today, let me remind all baptized believers among us today who you are – your identity: **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and people belonging to God, that you might declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”**

**“Once you were no people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”<sup>4</sup>**

Don’t let anyone take what is special – sacred – and holy to us and call it profane. Remember who you are and whose you are. That gives us an identity and inheritance which will never fade away.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz, May 27, 2007  
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#### **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Fred B. Craddock for this insight.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Bishop William H. Willimon for this material.

<sup>3</sup> NIV, Jeremiah 6:16.

<sup>4</sup> NIV, I Peter 2:9-10.