

“Everything Is Holy: Our Memories”  
Joshua 4:1-7

Last Sunday, I was so surprised to find myself reminiscing with someone about the days of COVID-19 lock downs when our social lives slowed down a bit. This person was sharing with me about all the weddings and activities that they have planned for their summer and how difficult it is to manage all the different pieces that come with such busyness. It was strange to remember something positive about that time of lock down. It made me wonder about what we will remember from this experience of going through a pandemic. Will we forget it completely? Will we live in fear into the future obsessing about another possible outbreak?

Human memory is a gift and a challenge at the same time. Memories are essential to our own identity and history. Yet, our memories could also haunt or deceive us. Sometimes we only remember the positive stuff of the past forgetting about the difficulties or injustices that were present. Other times, our painful or hate-filled memories do not allow us to move forward in positive ways. The writer Fred Buechner said the following about remembering: “In one sense the past is dead and gone, never to be repeated, over and done with, but in another sense, it is of course not done with at all or at least not done with us. Every person we have ever known, every place we have ever seen, everything that has happened to us-it all lives and breathes deep in us somewhere whether we like it or not, and sometimes it doesn't take much to bring it to the surface in bits and pieces. A scrap of a song that was popular years ago. A book we read as a child. A stretch of a road we used to travel...Old failures, old hurts. Times too beautiful to tell or too terrible. Memories come at us helter-skelter and unbidden, sometimes so thick and so fast that they are more than we can handle in their poignance, sometimes so sparsely that we all but cry out to remember more.” (Frederick Buechner “A Room called Remember”)

How do we find the sacred in our memories, even the difficult ones? How will we emerge out of the difficult memories of this pandemic?

There is an ancient practice that is still popular today. It is called building a cairn which is a collection of stones put on top of each other to indicate someone's experience of the sacred in a certain spot. It is a way to remember. This was before people could take a picture and post it on social media. This was their way of remembering significant spiritual spots.

In our Bible story for today, we hear about such a practice. This was the last part of the journey of the people of ancient Israel after they left enslavement in Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. It was their time to enter into the land they would call home, but they needed to remember God's faithfulness on the path. In this passage, we hear their leader, Joshua, asking them to get 12 rocks out of the dried-up part of the Jordan River in order to build a stone memorial so that future generations would remember.

Part of the problem for the people of God was forgetting that God was their guide and the one who sustained them on the journey. Every time the people forgot that God was with

them, they stumbled and lost their way. Yet, remembering that God was with them when life was difficult was not always easy. In the same way, we need constant reminders of God's presence. Our lives are filled with good and bad memories. Our hope comes when we are able to be grounded in remembering God's presence with us. Building a cairn, ringing a bell, lighting a candle, saying a prayer, worshipping together, reading the Bible, taking a deep breath, spending time in nature, and looking at others with compassion through the eyes of God are among the many ways we ground our memory in the hope and love of God. Instead of getting stuck in nostalgia about "the good old days" or in our memories of trauma or suffering, by looking at God's presence in our past and present, we can find our path forward.

The people of ancient Israel were invited to make a stone memorial representing God's presence and guidance for their twelve tribes. This gave them the ability to move forward with courage and hope. The journey out of slavery was difficult, but in all of it God was their faithful companion. This is the most important memory for the people. This was what they needed to hold onto. All the other memories had to be grounded in the one that healed and connected them all.

The same is true for us, if we are looking at our memories of this pandemic, other difficult experiences, or of our successes. We can look at them in a surface way or we can look deeply to remember God's presence in them. One of the spiritual practices I love is called "The Examen." This is when we review the events of the day to pay attention where we saw or experienced God's presence. It is an act of active remembering so that we can become more aware of God's presence.

We are going to practice this for a few moments. We will take a couple of moments of silence to allow memories of God's presence for us to emerge. Then, if you are comfortable, you may turn to a neighbor to share with them the memory and how you mark such remembrance to help you keep that awareness alive.

One of our core values as a congregation is remembering and celebrating the stories of our people, past and present. We remember and celebrate these stories of faith because they remind us how God works in our lives. One of the things that inspired me and gave me great comfort and courage during the pandemic were the stories of faith, service, and dedication of so many of you. When fear of the spread of the virus was gripping all of us, many of you with sewing skills went to work and shared masks with so many in the community. When isolation was breaking the hearts of the residents and families of our area nursing homes, you stepped into action by making cards, sharing dolls, prayers shawls, and flowers. When the world seemed to be ending, so many acts of care poured out of your hearts from food donations to community outreach. In the days when I faced the COVID-19 diagnosis for myself, I remembered the words of one of the saints of our church Richard McNulty about his experience of God's peace in the midst of war. Richard was in the Vietnam War as a nurse. One day while he was attending the wounded, the bombing got so bad that he ended up in a ditch praying for his life. In that moment, Richard felt God's presence in such a powerful way that he felt the peace of Christ cover him completely. That witness of faith has sustained me in the many times of fear and anxiety

during the pandemic. This is the power of remembering and celebrating God's presence in our lives.

I would like to end with a few words from Macrina Wiederkehr in her book *Gold in Your Memories*: "Gold is a mineral that, like the other precious treasures of the earth, needs to be mined. There are times when, with a careful eye, gold nuggets can be found on the earth's surface, but ordinarily finding the gold requires some digging.

There are times when the gold in our memories also needs to be mined. Some of the treasures in our lives are not always accessible to the heart's memory. As we learn to pay attention to life we discover there is a lot of gold hidden in plain sight. However, sometimes it takes something jarring and life-threatening to awaken us to this truth.

How can you remember the gold so it can continue to bless you today? First of all, you will have to acknowledge its presence in your life. It is difficult to search for something you don't believe in. Secondly, you will need to spend a lot of time with your soul. The soul thrives on remembering. Feed it memories and it comes alive. And it will help you to recall more memories if you show even the slightest interest in remembering.

There is a way that the soul can get crowded out of one's day. The soul is a bit shy and does not demand center stage. She lives a life of her own, and yet there are soulprints in every fiber of your being, even in the things you've forgotten. The soul is the keeper of memories. She knows where the beauty is stored. She contains the memories of your entire life. Deep in your unconscious she stands guard. If you are in need of a particular memory she can reveal it to you and help you to bear both the beauty and the pain. She knows all about the gold in your memories." Amen.