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MEMORY AND HOPE

In the 19th century, Palestine, formerly the land of Israel, was a neglected backwater of the Ottoman Empire. But devout Jews began moving back to the land, either to die in Jerusalem and be buried on the Mount of Olives, or to live in one of Judaism's four holy cities and study Torah and Talmud, dependent upon charity from overseas. But two rabbis had a bold vision, a new hope. They didn't want to simply die, or pore over religious books. They wanted to live, to live in the land and off the land. They wanted to farm the land again. And so in 1878 they founded the first modern agricultural settlement. They picked a significant name for their new venture: Petah Tikva, Doorway of Hope. This is a name drawn from Scripture, a name associated with restoration and new beginnings.

Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord described how he would woo his unfaithful, forgetful people back to himself:

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

And there I will give her her vineyards
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt...”

And then words which I often use in premarital counseling and weddings:

“And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.” (Hos 2:14-15, 19-20 ESV)

“I will...make the Valley of Achor a *door of hope*.” A Door of Hope, Petah Tikva. That's the name they chose for their new settlement. They had a hope beyond dying. They had a hope of living.

The Valley of Achor is the Valley of Trouble, just outside Jericho. It's the place where Achan brought trouble on Israel. After the Fall of Jericho he took what belonged to the Lord, forgetting the Lord's warning that this would bring trouble upon Israel. He was dazzled by glittery, shiny things. In the ruins of Jericho he saw a beautiful cloak, some silver, and a bar of gold. He coveted them and took. This always reminds me of Eustace in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, who likewise was dazzled by the shiny, glittery things in the dragon's lair, and brought deep trouble upon himself. Joshua said to Achan, “Why did you *bring trouble* on us? The Lord *brings trouble* on you today” (Josh 7:25). Achan was stoned and the place was called the Valley of Achor, the Valley of Trouble.

Many centuries later God, through Hosea, promised Israel that he would put her troubles well and truly in the past, and open a door to hope. Notice that the promise of hope includes a recovery of memory: “she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” Restored Israel will remember that she is the people whom God redeemed from harsh

servitude in Egypt. And the promise of hope is based not on Israel's character but on God's character: his righteousness and justice, his steadfast love and mercy, his faithfulness. The result will be a change in Israel: she will know the Lord.

Nearly 150 years ago Petah Tikva was a doorway of hope for the Jews. It became known as *Em HaMoshavot*, Mother of the Moshavs, Mother of all subsequent collective farms. Just four years later in 1882 Russian Jews arrived and started a second agricultural settlement. They were fleeing the pogroms, the deadly anti-Jewish violence depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof*. They were fleeing trouble. Out of such anti-semitism was born Zionism, the movement to re-establish a Jewish state in the land. Its song was *Hatikvah*, The Hope. This hope was realized in the establishment of the state of Israel, and *Hatikvah* is now the national anthem.

Memory and hope are intertwined: “memories shape hopes and hopes influence memories.”¹ We live our lives between memory and hope.

The Roman god Janus was the god of transitions, of beginnings and endings, of doorways and passages. He is depicted with two faces, one looking back to the past, the other looking forward to the future.

We live our lives in constant transition between past and future. We live in the present which is instantaneous, an infinitesimally small point in time. Time is constantly passing from the future through the present into the past. We look back on the past in memory and we look forward into the future in hope. Memory and Hope. We are creatures of memory and hope. And the church is a community of memory and hope. For this last Sunday of the year, as we transition from 2019 to 2020, I want to consider these twin themes of memory and hope. At the end of the service we will have a time of Body Life in which you can share your memories and hopes. So be thinking of what you might share.

i. Memory

Memory. When we buy a new computer or new phone we want it to have enough memory, both to run apps and store data. The new Mac Pro can be configured with 1.5 TB of RAM. The latest iPhone 11 has up to 512 GB of storage for all the photos we now take. But memory has not always been so plentiful. Allow me a trip down memory lane. The earliest IBM-PCs had no hard disk. Instead you stored files on a 5¼-inch floppy disk holding 360 kB. The PC had 1 MB of RAM but with only 640 kB accessible by the user. Computer memory has come a long way in just 60 years.

But vastly more impressive is the human memory. The human brain can store untold amounts of information. In the early church bishops were required to know the entire Psalter by heart. Muslims have an honorific term for one who memorizes the entire Quran: he is a *hafiz*.

Contrary to *The Far Side* cartoon, we do not use our brain to their full capacity. Furthermore, the brain has neuroplasticity; it changes as we use it. The brain can rewire itself. The brain responds to exercise!

Memory is an amazing thing. Perhaps we sense this most when we see memory disappear. Among the tragedies of old age is the loss of memory: short-term memory as in dementia, or long-term memory as in Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. There's nobody there anymore.

But the human mind is much more than simply an information storage and retrieval device. Memory shapes who we are; it gives us our identity. Internally, in our own self-perception, we are what we remember about ourselves: what we have done and what has happened to us. Externally, as others perceive us, we are what they remember about us.² Our mind strives to make sense of our lives. This is why sleep is so important. During sleep our brain processes and organizes our memories. It discards many short-term memories. But other memories are stored away in long-term memory. We can consciously retrieve them at will: a name, a phone number, a password. But often memories return unbidden, triggered by a smell, or pop into our mind when we're doing something else.

Memories are good or bad, pleasant or haunting. The unbidden memories that pop back into our mind are often the haunting memories, triggered by something. Memories can paralyze us. The victims of abuse and other trauma are trapped within their memories and need intensive counseling to move beyond memory to hope.

So what are your memories? How have your memories shaped your identity? I'm sure there are many here who are haunted by memories. Many whose self-identity is damaged by memories: haunted by shame of what you have done, haunted by pain of what has been done to you in word or deed.

Scripture has a lot to say about memory. Repeatedly God urged Israel to remember, and chastised her when she forgot. Our Scripture reading today shows the importance of memory.

In the first passage, Moses addresses the second generation of Israelites, those whose parents had died in the wilderness, prior to their entrance into the land:

“Your eyes have seen what the LORD did... See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it... Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children.”
(Deut 4:3, 5, 9)

This generation was to pass on its collective memory to the next generation and beyond. But they failed to do so, as we see in the second passage:

And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel... And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. (Judg 2:7, 10-12)

Memory is not only individual, it is also collective. Communities have memory. Israel had memory. But the community forgot its his-

tory. The generation that entered the land had seen what the Lord had done on their behalf. But they failed to pass on their collective memory to the new generation which had not seen. As a result they knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel: that he had brought them out of the land of Egypt. When they needed help they didn't look to the Lord, because they didn't have memory. Instead, they looked around for other sources of help, and turned to false gods. This happened over and over again in Israel's history. And so they fulfilled the adage, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”³

We are glad to have the children and youth in our services today. You are the next generation. What are we passing on to you? What messages are you receiving from our generation? What memories and messages shape your identity? Is it that you're only as good as your grades? That your value depends on getting into the right school? On having the right friends? Do you feel loved unconditionally? Or do you feel unloved and unlovely? Do you belong? Or do you feel like a problem?

I'm sure there are people here who feel all these things. And not just the next generation. Among you parents I'm sure there are plenty who are haunted by memories, whose identity is fragile, who have suffered trauma from which you have not yet found release. Perhaps you have no hope. Without hope we die: emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and, yes, physically. Human beings are simultaneously very robust and very fragile. With hope a person can endure terrible hardships, suffering and wrong. Without hope even someone in the ease of life shrivels.

How can we turn from debilitating memories to hope? How can we pass through that doorway of hope?

2. Hope

What is our hope? Perhaps some of you are making New Year's resolutions that you're going to be a better person. Undoubtedly many of these resolutions will fizzle in just a few days or weeks. Or is your hope just a vague hope that it will all work out in the end? Hope can be delusional, it can be over-optimistic, it can be divorced from any reality. Or is your hope replaced by fear? Fear of the future can be as crippling as memories of the past. Fear of ill-health, of not getting the kids into the right school, of being laid off. Many kids grow up with fear. Or perhaps your hope is wanting to go back to the past, usually a mythical, idealized past. You have no aspirations for the future.

We all need an eschatology, a sense that there is a future. We all need a teleology, a sense of purpose. For many that may be pursuing the American Dream, or climbing the career ladder, or seeing the stock price or index continuing to rise. But when people attain these hopes they often find them unsatisfying.

So what should hope be?

Memory shapes our identity, what we think of ourselves and what others think of us. But we are offered a new identity. Israel was the people whom God had redeemed from Egypt, but Israel repeatedly forgot this identity and instead pursued false gods. God invites us to bring our broken, wounded selves to him for a new identity. Becoming a Christian is not about believing a long list of doctrine; it's not about getting a ticket to heaven. It's about identity. The word “Christian” is used only three times in the New Testament. Instead, Paul's favorite term is “in Christ.” We give our allegiance and devotion to Christ. We are his people, we belong to him. We are in

him. Paul's second favorite term is "brothers/sisters." We are part of a new family, brothers and sisters together. We have a new identity with respect to God and a new identity with respect to one another.

I got to see this most vividly growing up in Thailand where my parents were missionaries. They both worked with lepers. Lepers had an identity in the community: they were outcasts. This was especially hard in a Buddhist land, for it was assumed you must have done something terrible in a previous life to deserve being a leper in this life. There was no hope for such people. But missionary nurses went and touched them, treated their wounds, and told them of Jesus who reached out to lepers, who included them, and in whom they found belonging. It was the same for these lepers. They came to faith. They came to a God who they heard loved them. And they were filled with gratitude.

3. Remembering

The youth are with us today in Big Church. This may seem like a foreign land to you, something boring that your parents do, and you would much rather be somewhere else. What are we doing here in Big Church? One of the most important things we are doing is remembering. In the worship folder is the following statement: *We gather to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit.*

We are a community of memory. We gather to remind ourselves because we need reminders to refresh our memory which has become fragmented through the week.

We remind ourselves who God is. Our call to worship included this verse:

Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (Ps 100:3)

You may feel like a lost sheep, lonely and forgotten, unseen and unnoticed. But the Lord is our Shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who hears the voice of his sheep, who searches for the lost sheep. He sees you and me. He notices us.

We remind ourselves of what God has done in Christ: "who for *us* and for *our* salvation...came down and was made man. For *our* sake he was crucified, suffered death and was buried...he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures and is seated at the right hand of the Father." That's from the Nicene Creed that we recited two weeks ago.

We remember these things in several ways. We remember by reading and hearing the Scriptures. We remember by singing hymns. Some churches recite the creed every week to affirm and remind themselves who God is and what he has done in Christ. Learning the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed can help us to remember. Some churches remember by following the Church Year, the liturgical calendar that is shaped around the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Finally, we take communion together on a regular basis; here we do so the first Sunday of each month. We follow Jesus' instruction: "Do this in remembrance of me." The Jews eat the Passover meal every year to remind themselves that God brought them out of Egypt. We take communion to remind ourselves that Jesus gave his body for

us, and shed his blood for *us* for a new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. In communion we affirm our identity: we are God's people in Christ through his Spirit. These things can become mere rote. But not necessarily so. They can be rich reminders of our story which reinforce our identity, keep our faith alive, and give us hope for the future. They can be habits of the heart. The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."⁴

We remind ourselves also of what God is doing through his Spirit. God who was at work in Christ in the past is still at work today through his Spirit. God is on the move. Here is much hope. We have a future and we have a purpose. We are individuals and a community in whom God is at work. God takes us as we are, in all our broken fragmented selves, but he has great aspirations for us. "No one has seen God, but his One and Only has made him known" (John 1:18), as we've heard the last few weeks in our Advent series. Jesus has made God known. Jesus is how God represented himself to first-century Israel. Now *we* are privileged to make him known. We do this by telling people about him. But we also do it by living like Jesus. God wants us to be like Jesus. He wants to conform us to his image that is perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. When people look at us he wants them to see Jesus. Obviously if we are to make him known we need to know him and what he has done.

Knowing Jesus and making him known. This is the main banner on our home page. Knowing Jesus and making him known. Here is a good New Year's resolution.

We have a framework for memory and hope.⁵ Who are we? What is our identity? We are the beloved of God for whom he has worked in Christ and through whom he is still working by his Spirit. Where do we belong? We belong in the community of God's people as brothers and sisters together as family. What is our hope? The Biblical story is intrinsically hopeful; there is a forward trajectory to it. What is our ultimate trust? Upon whom do we ultimately rely? Our ultimate trust is in God.

Memory and Hope. We live between the two. When we come to God in Christ through his Spirit, he doesn't immediately make everything better. But we have a framework in which to pursue the hard work of overcoming our trauma, of learning to love and be loved, to trust and be trusted.

A final way we remind ourselves is with the liturgy of Body Life. So we will take a few minutes to share our memories and hopes.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom 15:13)

1. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 100.

2. Volf, *End of Memory*, 24.

3. George Santayana.

4. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

5. Volf, *End of Memory*, 102.