

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

May 24, 2009

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Job 29:1-6

“What Memory Knows”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

This is Memorial Day weekend—a federal holiday set aside to commemorate, honor and remember U.S. men and women who died while in military service. Although not a religious or liturgical holiday, Memorial Day gives us the opportunity to reflect on memory, and what it means to us as Christians to remember. Remembering is central to our faith. Let us pause on this Memorial Day to consider why and how remembering is significant to us as members of the family of God.

Memory.

What we remember shapes who we are and how we understand our place in the world. What we remember informs our present life and influences our future.

What we remember lies at the core of our being.

Poet Gail Mazur wrote these simple but powerful words,

“It is as if memory is life itself.”

Remembering is central to the lives, work, and worship of our Jewish ancestors in the faith. Remembering is today and it has been for millennia of the greatest important to the Jewish people.

When Moses gathered the Israelites to teach them the Ten Commandments, he embedded in his weighty monologue that included the law, the very instructions that would guide their lives for countless generations to come, these telling words: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

We heard that passage read today from the Book of Deuteronomy...

“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt...”

You are not a slave today....but remember that you once were.

For your history, your story, your past is important every day in your current life.

Remember where you came from and who you were so you can understand who you are today. Remember how God brought you out from Egypt with a mighty hand.

Remembering is an underlying theme that reoccurs in the Hebrew Scriptures. When our ancient brothers and sisters were exiled from the homeland they loved, driven out of Israel to Babylon, they remembered their homes, they remembered their land, they remembered their temple, they remembered their God, and they drew strength from the remembering and vowed to someday return home.

Some of you know the song *By the Waters of Babylon* based on Psalm 137,

*By the waters of Babylon, where we lay down
and there we wept, when we remembered Zion.
For the wicked carry us away captivity
Require of us a song
How can we sing a sacred song in a strange land?*

What we remember shapes us and lives within us. What we remember causes us to smile or to cringe, to grow melancholy with a far-away look in our eyes, to recall with fondness, or to shudder and say “never again.” What we remember takes up space within us, sets up shop inside us, colonizes our minds, and burrows into our bodies.

What we remember burrows deeply into our bodies.....Years ago our son Sasha announced that he wanted to learn to snowboard and he talked Michael and me into taking him to Okemo Mountain for a snowboarding lesson. Once there, Michael and I saw that Sasha would be on the “Bunny Hill” (as they called it) and we decided to take a ski lesson—partly so we could be on the Bunny Hill with him and partly to try to ski. I had grown up skiing but it had been 30 years since I had last skied so Michael and I signed up for a beginners’ lesson together. We learned to snowplow and took the T-bar up the Bunny Hill. The instructor skied down first and motioned for Michael to come. Michael snow plowed a bit, fell, got up, snow plowed further, couldn’t stop, crashed into the instructor and fell again. The instructor then motioned for me to ski down. I started snow plowing down the hill when I felt my body bring those skis into a parallel formation. Then without thinking I bent my knees, planted my ski pole, and did a graceful swish turn. Then, still without thinking, I made the same turn again. At the bottom of the hill, the instructor said, “You did slalom turns. How did you know how to do that?” “I remembered,” I said.

Our minds remember and our bodies remember. And it turns out (you may also have heard this report on NPR this week) that when we pray our brains remember to turn on and turn off certain lobes in a dramatic fashion that shows up when people who are praying are studied with dyes that show brain activity on a computer screen. People who pray often show a consistent pattern when they settle into prayer: their occipital lobe becomes dormant with few synapses firing—that is the lobe where the ego, the “I,” the needs of self reside. Simultaneously, frequent pray-ers show their frontal lobes lighting up when they begin to pray—lots of neural activity. That the lobe where the three C’s reside: caring, compassion and connection.

Our bodies have muscle memory and our brains have neural memory.

Remembering is fundamental to who we are.

And remembering is fundamental to our faith.

Because when we experience God with us and near us, we remember that experience, we remember that feeling, we remember and we store that memory in our minds and in our bodies so we can recall it, retrieve it, reclaim it when God seems far away.

My precious sisters and brothers, we all have times in our lives when God seems far away. We may be despairing, depressed, alone, frightened, sick, lethargic, facing loss or tragedy and God seems remote or silent. We all have times when, like our ancient brothers and sisters traveling through the wilderness, we feel like lost wanderers. We all have feelings of being abandoned by God and we raise our fists or shake our heads and ask: “Where are you now? Why are you quiet? Why am I in such pain?”

Even Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

At those times, when we feel forsaken ...we are able to remember that God has been with us, God has felt close, God has been and is still in our hearts.

It is then that God lives in our memory, not in our current reality, but in our memory.

And that is good enough.

Even the memory of God can carry us through the dark night of the soul.

God lives in our memory, and for that we are grateful.

Remembering is part of our tradition, part of the tradition we inherited from our Jewish foremothers and forefathers. And in that Jewish tradition, remembering is a central part of the painful story of Job.

Today's reading from the Book of Job tells us how Job had to **remember** God during his prolonged time of trial.

To fully appreciate the passage read today from Job Chapter 29, recall the background that led to these words said by Job. Job was a wealthy and a righteous man. But because of a dispute between God and Satan, Satan is allowed to test Job.

And so as the story goes, Job faces many horrible trials and losses. He loses his sons and daughters. He loses all his property, his flocks are driven away by enemies, and his health deteriorates dramatically. When Job, a righteous man, prays to God, his prayers are answered by silence.

Three friends come to Job to help him make sense of his supreme misfortune and God's silence. In today's reading, we hear Job responding to his friends. There has already been much back and forth between them all—three cycles of speeches. But in today's passage, Job is remembering a happier time in his life. He sounds wistful. Although he has been praying to God and finding God to be silent in return, Job remembers God and his closeness to God in times past. Job remembers when God felt so near, when God even visited his tent,

*O that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;
when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness...
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
when the Almighty was still with me...*

My beloved ones, you must grab a hold of and store up those times when you feel close to God, when “the friendship of God” is in your home and in your heart. Grab a hold of those times and store them inside you so you can remember God when you travel through the valley of the shadow of death.

We were never promised easy lives. We will face pain in our lives, it is inevitable. But when we face emotional, physical, spiritual, mental challenges and God seems to recede, to withdraw, to grow silent, we can remember that God has visited our tent, we can remember that God's friendship was upon us.

God does not really withdraw. But sometimes our suffering is so great that God's voice is drowned out by the voices of pain that ricochet through our minds.

But as people of faith, as frequent prayers, our experience of God, our closeness to God is wired into our neural network and we can remember how to pray and we can remember that God loves us.

Remembering is woven into our muscles.
Remembering is embedded in our minds.
Remembering is part of our history as people of faith.
Remembering is part of our tradition.

Our muscles know what to do even when the memory is 30 years old.
Our brains know how to pray even when we feel abandoned and alone.
Our hearts know where to find God even when God seems distant.

Poet Gail Mazur was right, “It is as if memory is life itself.”
For memory gives us life again when we, like Job, are able to remember God when we face the dark night of the soul. Memory lets think of God and say
I remember

*when God watched over me;
when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness...
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
when the Almighty was with me...*

There is a Buddhist expression that in life pain is inevitable but suffering is optional. That may be true. Because even in the greatest pain, when God seems far away, we can remember that God watched over us and the friendship of God was in our homes and in our hearts. And we can be comforted and even rejoice.

Amen.