

First Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
6 March 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

I have been thinking a great deal about corporate memory. This is a term used to describe how entire cultures and groups remember specific events in their life, and the many ways in which these memories affect how people view the world. Let me give you an example. Before the People's Republic of China came into existence in 1949, China had had a terrible century from 1849 to 1949. This is known as the *Century of Humiliation*. China had been soundly defeated by the British, the French, and the Japanese in a series of humiliating military defeats. These powers often showed their heavy-handedness by torturing and shaming the people of China. How Chinese people have seen the world in the second half of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st has a great deal to do with this century of humiliation.

Let me give you an example: In 1999 the former Yugoslavia invaded Kosovo, their neighbor. NATO reacted by bombing Yugoslavians for nearly 3 months, killing approximately 1600 people, including three Chinese journalists who died when NATO accidentally leveled the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. This event was a deeply felt issue in China with mass demonstrations in the streets, boycotts against American businesses, complaints against America in international justice tribunals, etc. No amount of apologies were sufficient, and NATO had to solve the matter by making restitution for China's loss. Events like these made China very weary of the West and Japan (the humiliators) and they have sought to become a nuclear super-power to prevent any future humiliation. They have also invested heavily in the West and Japan, seeking to greatly influence the economy of their subjugators. In fact, this desire to prevent another century of humiliation has led China to go to any extent to achieve super-power status, as we have seen in the last twenty years.

The problem with corporate memory is that it can also be lost. A recent study in the United States has shown that people are likely to forget who the president was beyond the last two or three presidents. In fact, even if Americans remember the names of presidents, they often forget what party they belong to or how successful or unsuccessful they were. As an example, many Americans believe Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin were presidents, and they believe James Monroe is a Hollywood actor. Today, we have a similar case in the reading from Deuteronomy. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, Moses and his people find themselves on the plains of Moab, preparing to cross the Jordan River to invade the city of Jericho. From Jericho, the nation will eventually conquer the entire Promised Land. Moses has a problem, however. Many of the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt have died and the new nation had no memory of Mount Sinai when God gave them the Law. The events at Mount Sinai had formed the national identity of that first generation, but as the years passed, the people

began to forget their covenants. Moses realized that in order for the people to remain faithful to the Law, they needed to be reacquainted with the precepts that God had given Moses at Mount Sinai. He then assembled the whole nation and proceeded to preach four lengthy sermons meant to educate the nation on national history: They were a nation whose identity was rooted in their relationship with God. They were a covenant nation and their future depended on their obedience to what God expected from them once they took possession of the land. The nation's corporate memory had to be refreshed. They needed to reconnect with their national identity to fulfill their national vocation. Memory is crucial to identity, and identity precedes vocation! We must remember who we are to know where we are going. This is Moses' reason for preaching these sermons.

Today's section of the book is the conclusion of a speech meant to remind the nation of the covenant laws at Sinai. This speech comprises the very center and heart of the entire book. The passage has to do with the required ritual all land-owners needed to follow at harvest time, especially on the first harvest. They were to select a portion of the harvest, called the "first fruits," and bring it to the priest to be consecrated to God. The priest would then bless the first fruits, and through it, bless the rest of the harvest. After this blessing, abundant food was to be prepared for all in the landowner's household, those who depended on him (workers, servants, tenants, etc.), and a group of land-less people that included orphans, widows, aliens, and priests.

Priests are included in this group of the "dispossessed" because the tribe of Levy was not to be given a share in the promised land, but rather, they were dedicated to the service of the Lord and his people. They were the priests who offered services to God throughout the land and who oversaw the sacrificial system on behalf of the nation. As land-less people, priests depended on the support and care of those who used and benefitted from their services. The purpose of this "first fruits" was not for the support and care of the Temple or Tent of Meeting (Prior to Solomon's Temple.) Rather, it was an offering to God that was meant to feed the landowner's household and those in need who lived in the area. The first fruits offering needed to be large enough to provide plenty of food for the people mentioned above.

The reading describes a ritual that needed to be followed when the landowner presented the First Fruits to the priest. He was to say, "A wondering Aramean was my father..." This expression recalls the time Jacob, his sons, and their families, servants, and livestock made the journey to Egypt and settled in the Goshen Valley during the time of Joseph. It also reminds them of Abraham, who lived a nomadic existence in the same land, before his family became a nation. After acknowledging the humble beginnings of their nation, the ritual remembered the painful slavey under Pharaoh. It uses beautiful words to describe God's response to his people's misery in Egypt. God "saw" his people's pain. God "heard" his people's cries. God acted on behalf of his people by sending them a liberator by the name of Moses. The idea that God sees, hears, and acts to alleviate the affliction of his people is a staple of biblical theology from the very first pages of Genesis to the end of Revelation.

The recitation of the landowner at the presentation of gifts recounts the journey of faith of the nation, from their wandering first ancestor to the moment in time when a mighty nation is ready to take command of the Promised Land. This recitation is similar to the credal statements Christians repeat every week in church. Our credal statements, developed during the first centuries of our faith, are narrative summaries of the truths we hold dear and the reasons we come to church. We say, “We believe in God, the Father Almighty...” This passage from Deuteronomy is a credal statement as well. Israel says, “A wandering Aramean was our father...” In both cases, what we see is a recitation of our communal faith. A remembrance of ancient truths that have given us our identity as the people of God. This is in fact what we do here every week. We gather to remember!

Both our creed and the Jewish creed of Deuteronomy demand that we remember. A theologian I know puts it this way, “When we forget, we are diminished and our self shrivels. When we forget our faith stories, the religious self- formed by those stories shrinks and is replaced by another self, the self-produced by competing cultural stories.” We are mandated to remember at least 30 times in the book of Deuteronomy. Remember that once we were slaves and now we are free. Remember that once we were lost and now we have been found. Remember that once we were broken and trapped by our sin and now we live in freedom through God’s intervention in our lives. Remember that God has never left you alone and that in every generation he has made himself known to you and your ancestors. Remember that the one who created us loves us and cares for us. Remember that Christ has died, Christ is Risen, and Christ will come again!

There is great power in remembrance. In fact, this is why we come to church. We come to remember what God has done for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. We come because our identity is closely connected to this meal we celebrate week after week and the stories we read from Holy Scripture. We come because we need to remember that we are not alone and that God loves us and remains with us in our lives.

My friends, many around the world are forgetting the grand narrative of Christianity. Many denominations are even ashamed of talking about Jesus because they don’t want to offend the non-Christians. We have made Christianity a private, subjective affair, and not a corporate story that forms our identity and gives meaning to our vocation in and for the world. Christianity is retreating and Christians themselves are leading the retreat away from the marketplace of the world and into the quiet places of the mind. Lent invites us to fight against this convenient and misguided forgetting. Lent challenges us to remember the Savior of the World, and what he has done for us, for our churches, and for our communities. We must tell these stories of salvation to anyone who would hear. This is our responsibility and privilege. Don’t remain silent! Don’t ever forget!

May we remember God’s love today and may we open ourselves to his care and protection. Blessings to you and yours. Amen!