

## Jogging Our Memories

### *Psalm 78:1-8 (The Message)*

*Listen, dear friends, to God's truth, bend your ears to what I tell you. I'm chewing on the morsel of a proverb; I'll let you in on the sweet old truths, stories we heard from our fathers, counsel we learned at our mother's knee. We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation—God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things (God) has done.*

*(God) planted a witness in Jacob, set (God's) Word firmly in Israel, then commanded our parents to teach it to their children so the next generation would know, and all the generations to come—know the truth and tell the stories so their children can trust in God, never forget the works of God but keep (God's) commands to the letter. Heaven forbid they should be like their parents, bullheaded and bad, a fickle and faithless bunch who never stayed true to God.*

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On a late spring Saturday morning, cars and trucks arrived at the church cemetery. After greeting one another, people put on their work gloves and grabbed their preferred tools - clippers, rakes, weed-eaters, hoes, shovels or wheel barrows. They moved across the graveyard with military precision and began the annual task of cleaning the place.

It had been a wet spring, so the weeds and grass were tall. The daffodils were spent, but the yellow flag irises were still blooming. The sweet smell of honeysuckle hung in the air and little yellow blooms were ripe for the picking.

This graveyard wasn't like a modern cemetery with flat markers, perfectly manicured green lawns topped off with uniform containers of plastic flowers. The headstones in this cemetery came in various shapes and sizes. Some were simple and unadorned. Others more elaborate with intricate carvings and lettering. Each a unique reflection of the person buried there.

The tallest headstone was supposed to belong to Reverend Smith the founding pastor of the church. But if you stood back and compared his with the reverend's second wife, Ethel, you'd notice that her worn granite marker was a little taller.

The most elaborate headstone belonged to William Jones III, also known as Cousin Willie. He gave a lot of money to the cemetery fund to install a sign, walking path and a couple of benches in the shade of the oak and poplar trees.

The deceased weren't people written about in history books. They didn't have streets or buildings named after them. They were just regular folk loved and honored by family and friends.

As the work progressed, so did the stories. The older generation told the younger about their relatives. They remembered the good and the bad and the blessings of God.

When it was time for lunch everyone set out their lawn chairs or spread their quilts on the ground. Betty always brought the quilt she made from left over pieces of cloth she used to make

clothes for her children. They were all grown now, but they remembered and told their kids the story of each outfit.

Coolers appeared with a bounty of picnic food. There were pounds of potato salad, dozens of deviled eggs, mountains of ham sandwiches and gallons of sweet tea. Everyone ate their fill and more.

While they ate, they told more stories of family and friends gathered in that final resting place. Some of the stories made them laugh. Some of them made them cry. The stories jogged their memories and they passed that collective memory on to the next generation.

The day was about so much more than cleaning the cemetery. It was about communing with the living and the dead. It was about connecting with their history and identity.

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The words come from Psalm 78; a hymn used in the Temple in Jerusalem. This particular song was composed by someone named Asaph who was King David's choir director, Twelve psalms are attributed to him.

Psalm 78 is a fitting scripture for this Memorial Day weekend because it's concerned with jogging our memories and how faith gets passed to the next generation.

The Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages says every two weeks the last fluent speaker of a language dies. When a language disappears, it takes with it a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human brain.

In Psalm 78 Asaph says our faith is as precarious as a disappearing language. It's always at risk. It's just one generation away from extinction. That's why storytelling is so important. God designed faith to be passed on through our words and deeds.

It doesn't matter if a person grows up in the church or comes to faith from outside the community. Biblical faith always depends on others. It depends on one person telling another person the story that they heard from someone else.

*God planted a witness in Jacob, set God's Word firmly in Israel, then commanded our parents to teach it to their children so the next generation would know, and all the generations to come - know the truth and tell the stories so their children can trust in God.*

If you stop and think about it, the fact our faith gets passed on is both a mystery and a miracle. As human beings, we are in a constant state of forgetfulness. We forget who we are. We forget whose we are. We forget why we're here. Collective amnesia characterizes our lives.

We stumble through our days lost and confused. We stress out running on that endless hamster wheel. We hurt those around us. We pile up stacks of stuff. We do all of it in a desperate attempt to remember our purpose, to jog our memories, but it doesn't work.

*Never forget the works of God but keep God's commands to the letter. Heaven forbid they should be like their parents, bullheaded and bad, a fickle and faithless bunch who never stayed true to God.*

Friends, we're all prone to forget. We forget we're God's beloved. We forget we're made to be in relationship with God. We forget we're called to glorify and enjoy God in all we do.

This is why hearing God's Story, telling God's Story, and learning that our stories are a part of God's Story is the most important thing we can do as people of faith.

In 2010, my wife Libby received her Doctorate in Educational Ministry from Columbia Theological Seminary. She spent four years studying the importance of narrative in our faith development. In her final paper, she told this story:

It was late in the day on a warm Palm Sunday in Albuquerque. The afternoon sun streamed through the glass doors of the church's meeting room. The 50+ women gathered in groups of six around the tables. There was a mix of ages from teenagers to ninety-year-olds. They heard the story of Mary Magdalene read to them from scripture. The leader presented some of the challenges Mary faced as a young woman in a patriarchal culture. Afterwards, the leader invited the women who came from Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, unchurched, and other backgrounds to reflect on and share their own experiences in the church. One 70-year-old woman shared her memories of when women were first ordained as elders and then as clergy in the Presbyterian Church. As she talked, a female high schooler's face filled with disbelief. "You mean there was a time when women could not be ordained?" The older woman told her story and that teenage girl understood the meaning of the biblical story in a startling new and very real way.

*We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation - God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things God has done.*

Jogging our memories that's what Memorial Day is all about. We remember our brothers and sisters who gave their lives in service to our country. We remember our wounded veterans who suffer in body, mind and spirit. We remember all of God's children who have suffered and died because of war.

At 3:00 pm tomorrow, I hope you'll stop for the National Moment of Remembrance. Stop whatever you are doing and unite with citizens around the nation for one minute. Bow your head and pray. Pray for peace – peace here at home and throughout our troubled world.

Jogging our memories, that's what the 100<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Tulsa Race Massacre is about this weekend. Over 18 hours on May 31 to June 1, 1921, a white mob attacked residents, homes, churches and businesses in the predominantly Black Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The event remains one of the worst incidents of racial violence in U.S. history, and one of the least-known. For a long time, news reports were squelched, despite the fact that hundreds of people were killed and thousands left homeless as homes and businesses were burned to the ground. I hope you'll watch one of the documentaries on this dark chapter in our nation's history, so that we never forget. Shows will air on the History Channel, PBS, Hulu or Netflix.

Jogging our memories, that's part of the fun in searching for and calling a new pastor. When I came here in 2002, the congregation created a timeline of the church's history from 1881 to the present on a wall in the fellowship hall. We used sticky notes to write down memorable events in our church, in our community and in each of our lives. As a new pastor it was really helpful to have this visual aid and understand these significant moments. I encourage you to do it again during the interim time as you discern where you've been and where God is calling you in the future when you call a new pastor to serve this congregation and community.

Jogging our memories. Remember who you are, sisters and brothers. Followers of Jesus! Remember whose you are. God's beloved! Remember God's Story and pass the faith to the next generation! Amen.

May 30, 2021 (Memorial Day Weekend)  
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