

Do You Remember?: Exodus 20:1-17

Norwalk Christian Church, March 8, 2015, Year B, Lent 4

Do you remember? This weekend, in the town of Selma, Alabama, people gathered in the thousands to remember. 50 years ago yesterday was “Blood Sunday”. Maybe you remember where you were that day?

On that day, March 7, 1965, another 600 gathered in that same town of Selma. Their task was one of remembrance, too, though their memories were fresher. Just days before, February 17th, Jimmy Lee Jackson died from a gunshot wound by an Alabama State Trooper. His only crime: protesting while black.

50 years ago, these 600 souls lined up at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in protest--in remembrance--of Jackson’s unjust murder. Their plan: to march from the foot of that bridge all the 54-mile way to Montgomery, Alabama, their State capitol.

As they began their march, they remembered Jackson. They remembered Medgar Evers. They remembered how not long ago, their families were slaves in their own country. They remembered how they had been emancipated, yet even now, they couldn’t walk through the streets without harassment. Their memories pushed them forward across that bridge, where on the other side they were met with tear gas and billy clubs.

Hearing about the planned protest, county Sheriff Jim Clark issued a summons to all white males of Dallas County, Alabama, over the age of 21 to join him that morning at the courthouse to be deputized. With his newly formed militia, they lined up on the other side of the bridge.

They, too, gathered out of memory. They remembered growing up in a segregated south, where blacks were expected to stay quiet and put up with Jim Crow. They remembered the hate they were taught by parents, teachers, preachers and politicians, that blacks were not equal, that if they wanted to hold onto their country, they better fight.

Their memories pushed them forward to the foot of that bridge, where they were met by protesters crossing over. They ordered them to turn around, but when they did not, they beat them with clubs. They fired tear gas in their eyes.

Maybe some of you remember seeing it? Newspapers all over the country ran on the front page the picture of Amelia Boynton, the march’s organizer, lying bloodied and unconscious in the middle of the road.

A few days later, Dr. Martin Luther King organized another march, demanding for State protection, but turned it around when the protection didn’t arrive. But a couple weeks after that, another march happened, this time with Federal protection sent by President Johnson himself.

This march kept going, and after 5 days and 54 miles, adding more people every day, thousands of people, white and black, Jew and Christian, Catholic and Protestant, arrived on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol building. King began speaking, reminding our country of its values, and calling for the passage of a new law, the Voting Rights Act, which would give people of color the right to vote.

Stephen Somerstein stood behind King on the platform as he spoke, took out his camera, and took the now iconic picture of the back of King's head, with the sea of people in front of him. This photograph was recreated for the movie posters for the recent Oscar Nominated movie *Selma*. Maybe you remember seeing it?

Memory, it's a strange thing, isn't it? What you remember can significantly impact what you become. Memories transform us. Motivate us. For good, and for bad.

I was talking to a man not long ago and he was sharing his passion for helping struggling families. I asked him why he did this, and he told me the story of growing up in a poor family of 7. Everytime they went to their small town grocery store, the grocer without asking gave his family a box of vegetables and fruit, the ones he couldn't sell anymore, yet were still good to eat. This man, now he's trying to live his life like that grocer.

Memory is a strange thing, isn't it? The things we remember and the things we forget. A certain smell can bring back memories of our grandparents' dinner table, and their memory makes us want to be a better person. Who we are, what we become, what we do with our lives is deeply impacted by what we remember.

I'm not sure what you remember about the story of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Their story is our story, a part of our faith. Last week, we encountered Abraham and Sarah, these two faithful who left their homes and all they knew to follow God to a new land of promise.

God promised them a great nation, and that is what happened. Yet, time and circumstances led them to Egypt, a land that at first welcomed them, yet soon became hostile to them. As the Hebrews grew, the Egyptians feared what might happen to them if they become too numerous.

So Pharaoh, that's what Egyptians called their kings, made all the Hebrews slaves. From welcomed guests, to slaves--that was the path of Abraham's descendants. One would think that God had forgotten the promise he made to Abraham and Sarah.

Then, one day, we are told that God hears their cries and God remembers. Seems odd, thinking about God remembering. But God hears the cries of the Hebrews, remembers Abraham and Sarah, and decides to act. God chooses a shepherd named Moses.

Now, you remember, Moses wasn't always a shepherd. He was a Hebrew, yet he was raised in the palace of Pharaoh as an Egyptian. Yet he knew who he was, and one day when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he attacked the abuser, and killed him. Fleeing for his life, Moses left Egypt that day, never planning to return.

That is, until God shows up years later in that burning bush. "Remember our people in Egypt," God said to Moses. "Go back to Pharaoh, and tell him I said to let my people go."

After some protesting, Moses goes to Pharaoh. And after some protesting, Pharaoh does what Moses asks of him, and lets the Hebrews go.

There, on the edge of Egypt, these former slaves gather together by the tens of thousands, and have a march. They march right out of Egypt. Right through the Red Sea, which parts right in front of them, revealing a dry bridge through the water. Across that bridge they march, and they keep marching until they arrive at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

Moses climbs the mountain, like steps on a courthouse, where we are told Moses meets God. And what does God say to Moses? Remember. Remember who I am and who you are. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And then, based on this memory, God gives them a new law.

We call them the Ten Commandments. It's hard not to picture a wagging finger waving at us, as we read it: "Thou shalt not! Thou shalt not! Thou shalt not!"

For many of us, hearing the Ten Commandments brings back so many bad memories of feeling guilty, fearing that God was angry at us because we didn't do what was right.

Some say that if we hung these Ten Commandments in our schools and public buildings today, people would remember God's law, and maybe stop doing so many bad things.

One Supreme Court Justice in Alabama thought this so strongly that he had crafted for his courthouse a gigantic monument weighing over 5,000 pounds. That's just over 500 pounds per commandment. You may remember, a big fight ensued, as some said the monument violated Church-State separation, while others argued our nation would fall apart if these commandments were not at the center.

I remember living in the South during this fight, and seeing yard signs all over the place. I'd drive through a rural road in south Alabama, and signs were everywhere with the Ten Commandments on them. Front-yard protests to the removal of the monument. These folks weren't about to forget.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

What is the best way to remember this? Should we fight for the right to erect monuments? How do we remember the God who saves us?

I will never forget the conversation I had with Willie Bennett. October 3, 2008. It was the first time we met, and though I didn't know it yet, he would soon be my boss. He was a community organizer, the executive director of Dallas Area Interfaith, and I came to him searching. At the time, my congregational ministry wasn't going great. I felt God pushing me to something new and different, but I didn't know what. I had heard about Willie and the work he did. It sounded interesting, so I set up a time to talk.

It was the strangest, most invigorating conversation I ever had. He was interested in me and why I was there, talking to him. I will never forget the question he asked. We had been talking about what my passion in ministry, my desire to more to directly serve the poor and work to bring about justice. And Willie looked at me and asked me, simply, "Why?" "Why would someone like you want to do work like that?"

He wasn't being insulting. He wanted to know. But more than that, he wanted to know *if I knew why*. And you know, I didn't know how to answer.

Why? Why do we do what we do? Why do people march in protest in the face of danger? And after they are beaten, why do they get back up and do it again? Why are we here? Why do we worship? Why do we serve? Why?

I've been thinking about Willie's question for 6 years, and while I haven't arrived fully at my answer, I think I've made some progress. Why do I do what I do? Because of where I've been, Willie. Because of the people in my life, because of the things I've seen. Because of Olympia, a woman I met on a mission trip to Honduras. Because of the life of service modeled to me by my father. Because of a church that loved me. Because of a God who saved me.

Israel, why would you, this ragtag nation of liberated slaves, agree to live this way, building a community of respect and dignity, where people were treated honestly and fairly, and life was valued? Why would you organize your life about the love of your neighbor? Because you remember! You remember the love you have for the God who brought you out.

Put the Ten Commandments on your wall. Carve a graven image of them out of stone, if you must. Model your morality after the behavior they teach.

But you better remember! You better remember!

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out...." Remember. And then do what you have to do, because of what God has done for you.