
Rivers of Memory

Psalm 137

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 6, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

1963. What a year. I have no clue where I was. I don't remember. But, remembering is wise so today I want to remember. I do not want to forget. But, memory is a tricky thing. We may just forget or suffer from some form of amnesia. Or, we may engage in selective memory. Mark Twain once said, "When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it happened or not." We may choose what to remember and what to forget. If we are honest with ourselves when we remember, we may realize that the things we once did all day long, now takes us all day long to do. Our memories may even be distorted and imaginary—sometimes oral history may just be the oral version of his story and not history at all. Recently, someone told me that in his memory, I was 6' 9" tall (I suppose the Duke Chapel pulpit helped with that) but now he sees that I'm just "tall in the Spirit." I like that but you see how rumors start! We need to remember, but we need to remember rightly in a world that has gone wrong.

1963. What a year. Think about what happened in that year. In April, Martin Luther King, Jr. is imprisoned for anti-segregation protests in Birmingham, Alabama, and writes his seminal piece that we now call the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." In May, during civil rights protests in Birmingham, Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor uses fire hoses and police dogs on black demonstrators. In June, in Jackson, Mississippi, Mississippi's NAACP field secretary, 37-year-old Medgar Evers, is murdered outside his home. In August, in Washington, DC, there is the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as Dr. King delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In September, in Birmingham, Alabama, four young girls—Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins—attending Sunday school are killed when a bomb explodes at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In November, President John F. Kennedy is assassinated. 1963. And right here at Duke University in that same year, five black students integrate the undergraduate class for the very first time (Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke, Mary Mitchell Harris, Gene Kendall, Cassandra Smith Rush and Nathaniel White Jr.). Three of them are present today, participating in worship. You, too, are founders of a new beginning at Duke University. We salute and honor you and your courage.

They are a living memorial to the struggle for civil rights and human dignity in this country and the world. Their presence calls us to remember. We shouldn't forget the bridge that brought us over. But not everyone wants to remember the past. For some it is still too painful. We rather celebrate the past, and of course, we celebrate the courage and resilience and faith of the Duke trailblazers. But if we are honest, not everything in the past should be celebrated. Some things need to be lamented. There have been many rivers to cross and not everyone made it to the other side of the river. Rivers, like the "River Jordan" in many spirituals, can symbolize death. They may also represent all the tears that were shed. As we remember the past, the echoes of our memories remind us how tears were our companions on the way.

The memories may flow and flood our lives like rivers, like "the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked for mirth." There, the place of memory. Our memories have a place, a location, a situation. Memories are *in situ*, even if we are dislocated and in exile. The psalmist calls our attention to 'there.' The rivers of Babylon are the famed Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that flowed through ancient Babylon and now flow through contemporary Iraq. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem was burned and its temple destroyed and the ancient people of Israel went into Babylonian exile. It was not the best of times, but the worst of times. A plaintive psalm with mournful refrains. A memory of misery because it was a life without music and if you can't sing, you might as well be dead. There they asked, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" They couldn't, though their tormentors taunted them to live into the "happy slave" motif. This psalm is "shorthand

for the agony... of producing entertainment from ravagement” (Jim Perkinson). They couldn’t or wouldn’t—‘there.’

Their misery leads to thoughts of murder. Memory can be dangerous. The exiled are enraged and have “fantasies of revenge”(Brad Braxton)—“happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” This is what being ‘there’ can do to one’s psyche—those exilic rivers. Certain memories can lead to a desire for retribution, violence for violence, hatred for hatred, only becoming what you hate by perpetuating the logic that maintains oppression. It is honest in that it reveals how violence enacted upon a community can incite a violent impulse in that oppressed community. We see it in our world when people experience their own Babylon and turn to violence. Not rocks but guns, becoming one nation under guns and not God. Yet one should be careful not to be “velvet mouthed,” holier than thou, because “it is one thing to talk of the bitter feeling which moved captive Israelites in Babylon, and quite another thing to be captives ourselves under a savage and remorseless power...”(Charles Spurgeon). We can’t try to “fix” disturbing portions of scripture, as some have tried; it is in the Bible and we’ve said “thanks be to God” after it was read. Maybe we said that not to condone the desire for violence, but to acknowledge the truth of it, the truth of our human condition, the truth of how we feel sometimes. It is a “notorious concluding line” (Robert Alter), the result of being at those particular rivers, ‘there’.

There we sat down and there we wept. There we hung up our harps. Were you there? “I’ll take you there.” At the sit-ins at the lunch counters, courthouse, and City Hall of Durham. There. In the Allen Building takeover of 1969. There. Seeing burning crosses in front yards. There. Being hosed down in streets like dogs. There. By the rivers of Babylon, USA. There someone wept and remembered Zion, remembered freedom and justice and God. Those rivers, there, bring back a flood of memories. ‘There’ is branded in your own memory perhaps. You probably have your own ‘there.’

But there is the truth. The truth of the past. Of struggle, sorrow, exile. ‘There’ we can tell the truth and if you don’t tell the truth, you can’t truly reconcile. To remember ‘there’ is to remember the truth, the jagged edge of life, that life is not always easy. It’s truthful to speak of the rivers of Babylon and how perhaps being black and wearing Duke blue is representative of a black and blue experience, a bruised one for some alumni. To remember is to be courageous. It takes courage to remember ‘there’ and then. To remember the pain of exile. It is the honest truth. And we’ve got to tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

That someone once said that a black would never preach in Duke Chapel and look at God! In honor of the 50th celebration of the first black undergraduates at Duke, we now have online what we call the Great Black Preachers series, audio recordings of some of the great black preachers who have stood behind this sacred desk throughout history.

The rivers of memory flow from ‘there.’ If you don’t acknowledge that you were ‘there,’ you won’t be able to make sense of here and now because the past shapes the present and the future. ‘There we wept when we remembered Zion.’

The psalmist doesn’t only recall the rivers of Babylon but in that memory, he recalls other memories like the memory of Zion. Zion, the place where everything was settled. A cultural, religious, and political home. A refuge. A city of God. We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful, Zion. We’re marching upward to Zion, that beautiful city of God. In that memory of Zion, they remembered God and God’s presence. In remembering God, God’s presence is made palpable even in exile. When they remember Zion, they not only think of the past but also remember the future too because not to remember is to not believe that there is a future. To remember the past is to remember the future rightly because you can’t right the future if you don’t tell the truth about the past. Memory is a fused horizon of the past, present, and future. All of the mentions of remembering in this passage—communal, personal, even theological—is a sign of hope for the future post-exile. It is a call to generations to remember our home and homecoming, our return to the future, a future with God. It is a call to remember that there are other “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins”(Langston Hughes), that “there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells,” (Ps 46:4) because God is that river.

In remembering Zion, God's home, we remember that God's presence flows like a river and we also remember that we are re-membered by God, not forgotten even if we find ourselves in Babylon. The psalm tells us that 'we' and 'I' remember, but that God remembers as well. "Remember, O Lord" the psalmist declares. When God remembers, something happens because God has an active memory. Some may ask where was God during the Babylonian days of segregation. God was 'there' re-membering us, putting the broken pieces of humanity back together, making things right, through the civil rights movement. When God re-members, God never leaves us the same way he found us. God is always working to make us whole. This is why God never shuts down on us like the government; he loves us too much. God never sleeps nor slumbers because he is always re-membering, even our past because the future of our past is not closed. Every shut eye ain't sleep and every good-bye ain't gone. God has kept the door of the past open that we may find a future pathway out of it. It is in our memory that we find the seed of hope.

Think about it. If we remember rightly, we may see our future embedded in the very architectural memory of Duke Chapel's past. The Chapel is at the heart of the university. The chief architect of this building, and much of West Campus, was a black architect, Julian Abele. Those in charge of the work were white and many workers were Italian immigrants. The stones of this building are a living memorial of the future God remembers for us. That to make something beautiful like Duke Chapel takes the whole community of God's people working together. Duke Chapel challenges us to re-member our future that was faintly present in the past. The Chapel is a sign that God will remember and re-members us daily. The building itself is the memory of our cruciform future and this memory breaks into the present.

This is why we do this in remembrance of Christ. For when we remember, Christ re-members us—our future, our humanity, our community—and puts us back together that we may have communion with each other on this World Communion Sunday. This table of memory bridges the past, present, and future. At this table, we re-member our future as God re-members us at this feast—one bread, one body, one people. This is how God remembers us.

And remember this—the wounds of the crucifixion were not erased by the resurrection. The resurrected body of Christ still bears wounds. That crucified memory is branded on his body so we do not forget the past, we cannot forget the past. Yet through his resurrected broken body, the past is remembered differently, is redeemed and reconciled for the hope of our future, as the fountain filled with blood flows, like life-giving rivers, from Immanuel's veins, reminding us that there is a river in Zion that will never be parched. Reminding us that down by the riverside we can still lay our burdens down. Reminding us that when you go through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you (Isaiah 43:2). Reminding us that we can be trees planted by the rivers of waters that brings forth fruit in due season (Psalm 1). Reminding us that we can testify, "I've known rivers, ancient, dusky rivers" and "my soul has grown deep like the river"(L Hughes) because "out of the heart flows rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

And though life isn't what it ought to be, life ain't what it used to be in 1963. So we remember in order to re-member 2063. Many of us won't be there. But I remember that God will and his river never runs dry.