
Memory Loss

Deuteronomy 6:1-15a

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, June 10, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Memory is a tricky thing—what we remember, what we forget. What we remember that never actually occurred. Mark Twain once said, “When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it happened or not.” When I was younger, I remember growing up in a pastor’s household. Memorizing Bible verses was very important. The B.I.B.L.E. yes that’s the book for me, I stand alone on the Word of God, the B.I.B.L.E! Oh, I remember memorizing parts of the Bible. It was just as important as eating food together around our dining table; word and meal were hand and glove in the household of the Rev. W. Byron Powery. We memorized verses like Psalm 121, “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.” We memorized the beloved Psalm 23— “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Some words you never forget. Some words you never want to forget.

We even memorized the shortest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 117, “O praise the Lord, all ye nations, praise him all ye people, for his merciful kindness is great toward us and the truth of the Lord endureth for all generations. Praise ye the Lord.” And of course, we memorized the shortest verse in the Bible from John 11— “Jesus wept.” I memorized these words and they still mesmerize me. They inhabit my cerebral cortex, and my memory, my life, my heart. These words are a part of me wherever I go; they have a portable ministry. They’re a touchstone to the past and a touchstone to faith. These biblical fragments, knit and hold my life together, and I’m thankful that I can draw from their ancient well.

What if we never knew or never heard that ‘Jesus wept’? What if we never heard that Jesus was human and wept like us and was acquainted with grief and mourned and moaned over the loss of a loved one? What if we just forgot this faith fact? A loss of this memory could lead to a loss of hope. But never hearing these words, the Word, wouldn’t be our fault per se. Yet what we hear shapes our spiritual gear, shapes how we see each other and see the world. I still can hear ‘my father’s preacherly voice’ quoting scripture and praying at all hours through the night. And yes, sometimes hearing him kept me up at night and interrupted my sleep. But that hearing has been the source of remembering, a fund for my memory. If I never heard, I wouldn’t know and would have nothing to remember. So, what have you heard throughout your life? What do you remember?

You might come away thinking after last week’s sermon that it’s all about words and speaking since Deuteronomy begins with “These are the words...” But remember that the ministry of the Word, these words, requires an ear, not just a voice. Actually, the first step toward a deeper relationship with God, revealed by Moses, is to remember to listen. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God,

the Lord alone.” Hear, O Israel. Not speak, O Israel. Not “tell me everything on your mind, O Israel.” The first command is to hear, not anything else. “To hear” means “to listen” and in Deuteronomy it also means “to obey.” If we don’t hear, if we don’t listen, there will be no obedience. How will we know what to do if we don’t listen? How will we know what’s really important to God if we don’t listen? How will we remember anything if we don’t hear? This is a reminder that the life of faith is a listening life, even though I’m up here doing all of this talking. The life of faith is not just about going on missions and acting and doing and marching and protesting and praying. It is about hearing, listening. This is why we have two ears and one mouth, to cultivate a ministry of the ear. Hear, O Israel.

This command is so significant within the Jewish tradition that this portion of scripture is known as the *Shema*, taken from the first word in the verse— “hear.” *Shema*. “Hear this! Listen up!” This command is at the heart of Jewish faith and recited twice a day by the faithful, in the morning and at night. The emphasis is on our ears, not our lips. Hear (*shema*), O Israel. Hear, O Duke Chapel.

Even with all of its emphasis in Deuteronomy, too many words may get us in trouble. As the saying goes, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.” So remember, hear first. If you hear, if you listen, you have the opportunity to remember. But if we don’t hear, I fear that our memory will only be full of self when it should be full of God. Remember to hear.

The *Shema*, also known as the Great Commandment, presents another command, too, really the heart of the matter. “Hear (*shema*), O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul [or being], and with all your might [or capacity].” In this succinct summary of God’s law, the second command is love. Hear. Love. Deuteronomy is the first book of the Bible to command the love of God. Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry wasn’t the first to proclaim this when he did so at the recent royal wedding—love! The heart of our Judeo-Christian faith is the love of God. Don’t let anyone tell you something different. Love is the heart of God; it is stronger than death and it never fails. In Deuteronomy, obedience to God’s commands is “indistinguishable from love of God” (Ellen Davis). Loving God and loving God’s commands are identical. To hear, to obey, is to love.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart. “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” The *Shema* focuses on the heart. The heart, in biblical physiology, is the seat of intellect, will, and affect. You hear. You love. You take to heart and it takes your heart over. But then this command demands not only an internal movement but an outward one, one that also helps the people remember to love. My dissertation advisor, Paul Scott Wilson, who’s been here to preach, asked a piercing question a few years ago that helped remind me to love. His question to me was, “How are you doing with loving the people?” The love of God and love of people are interwoven. But it’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

William Sloane Coffin, former Yale University Chaplain and senior minister of the Riverside Church, told a story in one of his sermons that makes the point. “Yesterday I heard of a man who took great pride in his lawn, but he found himself with a large crop of dandelions. He tried every method he knew to get rid of them; still they plagued him. Finally, he wrote to the Department of Agriculture. After listing all the things he had tried, he closed with the question, ‘What shall I do now?’ In due course came the reply, ‘We suggest you learn to love them.’” Dandelions. People. God.

Love them. The good news of God's love shouldn't be hidden under a bushel but spread all over like a warm blanket in a cold world. You can't keep love to yourself if it's really love!

This is why Moses teaches, "Recite [these words] (referring to the Shema) to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Moses teaches different tactics to enhance their memory, to help them not forget this great commandment of love. Lord, help us, if we forget to love. This is a call to keep speaking about love across generations all the time and everywhere. No domain is exempt from the love command. No person is excused from loving. Keep hearing about this love through speaking. Keep hearing about this love through seeing them on your hand or forehead or on the doorposts. Surround yourself with this command of love because love is inescapable and nothing will separate us from this love (Romans 8). Remember this and use any means necessary to remember (even a laptop screen or an iPhone app) because if we lose our hearing, we'll lose our way and lose what really matters. We'll lose our souls. We'll lose our memory and we'll forget the love of God that binds the world together, that binds us together, that binds the triune God together.

What Moses' instructions suggest is that it's too easy to forget the words of God, which is why he teaches the different modes for remembering these words. We need constant reminders. Hearing about the love of God once will not be enough. It has to become a part of our lives, at home, away, when we lie down and when we rise. Moses knew, even in a different historical period, that attending church on Sundays is not enough. We have to do everything possible to not forget because these words of God are life, our life, our bread, at least they should be. "Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Recite them. Bind them. Fix them. Write them. In other words, repeat and remember. Hear those words again and again.

A spirituality of repetition can enhance our learning and memory. Through active remembrance of the *Shema* through repetition in whatever form, this will strengthen the likelihood of remembering permanently. For some, listening is enough. For others, they need to see because they are visual learners. Others need to write and are more tactile learners. This is how our brain works. If we never actively engage these words through our various learning styles, we will not remember and our hearing, our obeying, will become disintegrated and we will end up with spiritual amnesia, forgetting the heart of faith—love. How do you remember these words? How do you remember the Word? If we aren't deliberate, we will forget. We will forget what we've heard. We will forget the heart of following God—which is love and worse, think God's heart is hate.

And moreover, if this amnesia sets in, we may forget God altogether. Moses makes it plain. First, don't forget to hear. Second, don't forget to love. But then he gets to the climax—don't forget the Lord. "When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you *do not forget the Lord*, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Moses knows that we can suffer from theological amnesia and can be prone to forgetting all about God. Remembering is key throughout Deuteronomy. Memory loss is not about your age; it's about

your spiritual condition and outlook. If we ever get to the place where we think that all we have—the large cities, the houses, the hewn cisterns, the vineyard and olive groves—are our creations, from our might, we will demonstrate that we have forgotten how to love God and have not rightly heard whatsoever. We would show at that point that we have memory loss because we have forgotten the Lord and all that God has done to bring you out of Egypt or a horrible relationship or bad situation.

Do not forget the Lord because the life of faith is about God. “Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Hear God, O Israel. Love the Lord your God. Do not forget God. “When I think of the goodness of Jesus and all he’s done for me, my soul cries out hallelujah, thank God for saving me.” “God is here, as we his people offer to meet for praise and prayer.” “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.” “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” God in the morning. God in the noontime. God in the evening. God all day long. God’s not dead. God is alive. God. God. God.

It’s not Duke’s Chapel. It’s God’s Chapel. God’s choir. God’s organ. God’s pulpit. God’s lectern. God’s chancel. God’s table. God’s cross. God’s transept. God’s Memorial Chapel. God’s nave. God’s pews. God’s walls. God’s windows. God’s narthex. God’s doors. God’s lights. God’s sound system. God’s white albs. God’s stoles. God’s people. It’s all God’s. We’re all God’s.

Hear, O Duke Chapel. Remember. Do not forget the Lord who brought you out. Do not follow other gods. Remember the Lord. Do not forget to hear, to love, and God.

In his book, *A Room Called Remember*, Frederick Buechner, writes about remembering and hope. He says this: “Remember the wonderful works that [God] has done...--remember what he has done in the lives of each of us, and beyond that remember what he has done in the life of the world; remember what he has done above all in Christ—remember those moments in our own lives when with only the dullest understanding but with the sharpest longing we have glimpsed that Christ’s kind of life is the only life that matters and that all other kinds of life are riddled with death; remember those moments in our lives when Christ came to us in countless disguises through people who one way or another strengthened us, comforted us, healed us, judged us by the power of Christ within them. All that is the past. All that is what there is to remember. And *because* that is the past, *because* we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what he has done, he will continue to do, that what he has begun in us and our world, he will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition...The past and the future. Memory and expectation. Remember and hope. Remember and wait. Wait for him whose face we all of us know because somewhere in the past we have faintly seen it, whose life we all of us thirst for because somewhere in the past we have seen it lived, have maybe even had moments of living it ourselves. Remember him who himself remembers us as he promised to remember the thief who died beside him. To have faith is to remember and wait, and to wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true in us through our hoping...” Do not forget for Jesus does not forget us.

“Jesus remember me when you come into...”