

Core Work

The book of Exodus picks up where Genesis left off, giving us a picture of Jacob's descendants' thriving in Egypt. That was before. By verse 8, the writer tells us that a new Egyptian king comes to power who does not know Joseph. Time and generations have passed. The memory of the saving work Joseph did in and for Egypt has been forgotten. The multitudes of Hebrews are now seen as threatening, so the king begins a program of systematically oppressing the outsiders in his midst, using them to build his empire and keep them under his royal thumb. Part of his plan is to have all the baby boys killed. Two of my all-time favorite biblical characters, the gutsy midwives Shiphrah and Puah, and a brave Hebrew mother thwart that plan, and baby Moses floats his way into Pharaoh's own household. After a he kills an Egyptian guard for beating a Hebrew slave, a grownup Moses runs away to Midian only to be called back when God cries out to him from the burning bush. After multiple confrontations with Pharaoh, numerous demands to let his people go, followed by plagues of frogs, lice, and hail (just to name a few), we find ourselves standing with Moses on the night of the final plague, the Passover of God. [Read Exodus 12: 1-14]

About twenty-five years ago, I was asked to draw a picture of the first memory I could think of. What I hurriedly drew with stubby crayons was an image of my brother and me in our shared bedroom in our family's first home. It was bedtime. George was in his crib, and I was flipping the thin curtain back and forth playing peek-a-boo. I can still hear my brother's one-year-old giggles and my mother and father asking me to stop tugging on the curtain through their own laughter. I relish that memory and the easy laughter of three of my very favorite

people deep down in my core, which makes it what the movie *Inside Out* labels a “core memory.” As the Happiness character tells the others, “Core memories come from a super important time in [a person’s] life...and each core memory powers a different aspect of [a person’s] personality.”¹ The term “core memory” is not a scientific one. It has gained traction because it resonates so closely with our experience. And the notion of “core memory” has led contemporary parents to work intentionally and diligently to shape good, happy, significant experiences for their children. These parents hope and even pray that these moments will be lodged deep within their children’s hearts and souls as essential reminders of how deeply they are loved and treasured in childhood and beyond.

In a way, God could be considered an early adopter of the core memory trend. The words I just read were written down on scrolls from the time of David and Solomon through the Exile and compiled into a cohesive document after the Exile. So, as is the case with the rest of the first five books of the bible, these are the work of collected and collective memory, memory shaped in the face of utter destruction and almost unimaginable loss. Against the backdrop of the exile, these stories call to mind who God has shaped the people of ancient Israel to be. At God’s direction, these memories are shared and imbedded deep within ancient Israel’s core through rituals which are built on repetition and reenactment. In other words, remembering involves more than just thinking. Remembering requires doing and a healthy dose of imagination.

Traditionally, we Presbyterians get a bit nervous about the whole ritual thing. I’ve yet to participate in a Presbyterian worship service with incense or elaborate practices of kneeling.

¹ <https://pixarpost.com/2015/05/new-inside-out-clip-reveals-how-core.html>

That said, each and every one of the eight congregations I have served has deep affection for their traditions. One church worshipped for decades only at 11 pm on Christmas Eve. The service centered on music, and it was not unusual for children to be carried into worship already asleep, snuggled into their Christmas footie pajamas and draped over the shoulders of parents and grandparents. Another congregation was founded before the American Revolution. A family with deep and long ties to the church and the larger area held a reunion every three years, so it was not unusual to see at least one worshiper arrive costumed in 18th century garb. The congregation hadn't thought to alert me to this ritual, so I confess I was more than a bit startled to see a stranger walk in during the sermon dressed in breeches and a tri-corner hat and carrying a musket.

We have rich family traditions, too, of course. Maybe it just isn't Christmas without your grandmother's sweet rolls or your great-uncle's tacky light-up tie. Yes, some might be inclined to write our quirky traditions off as nostalgic quirks, but you and I know that the feelings associated with these memories reveal a deeper sense of who we are, what we believe, and where we find belonging. Not all core memories are happy of course. We can't control or manage or script our memories perfectly, so we are likely to remember at least a few moments we'd rather forget. The people of Ancient Israel told these stories for generations before they were written down and patched together on scrolls. Through the lens of the devastation of Jerusalem and the resulting exile, they desperately needed to remember God's promises. Their work of remembering happened not only in telling and re-telling the story but also in re-living the story, actively recalling that God had given them a script to follow, complete with stage directions. After detailed instructions about which lamb to choose and how to cook it, come

specific instructions about how to eat it: “This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly.”² This level of detail may strike us as odd. We may also be tempted to write it off as some old-fashioned notion of earning God’s favor by jumping through what may seem to be strange hoops. Notice however that for all the “shalls” in these texts, there is no “or else.” Instead, these rituals are intended to help the people remember God’s saving work as they learn and re-learn what it looks like and feels like to be transformed from people enslaved by an evil tyrant into a new people forever claimed by the one true God. Even the blood on the doorposts is designated as a “sign for you.” This script is intended to give the people not simply an academic or intellectual recollection but an embodied and tangible way of hanging on to who God is and always has been. The traditional Passover meal, the seder as it comes to be known, is a dramatic reenactment of this story, a way to help generation after generation learn and re-learn the story as they share it with their children. It is an intentional way of imbedding a core memory again and again and again, not simply for one family but for an entire people. Against an ever-changing backdrop in an always-changing world, this ritual offers a reliably fixed point, imprinting deep in our souls a reminder that the God of creation is the God of the Exodus and the God of our future, come what may.

That kind of core memory is absolutely crucial, because on our own we are not skilled memory keepers. As one memory expert explains:

² Exodus 12: 11, NRSVue

Memory [is] more like a painting than a photograph. [There are] often photorealistic aspects of a painting, but there's also interpretation. As a painter evolves, they could revisit the same subject over and over and paint differently based on who they are now.³

So our memories actually change as we age and change and grow. My drawing of that peekaboo scene might look different now. We are not computers or robots. We do not transcribe our lives as disinterested information collectors. We are blessedly and amazingly complex creatures, created to make meaning out of what we experience. Simply put, in God's unfathomable wisdom, God knows we are quick to forget what we need to remember. So God graciously gives us cues, scripts, and props to help us remember what God wants us to hang onto in our core. And God knows that such core-shaping memory is not done just by listening to a story or attending a lecture. We need tangible prompts that tap into our sense of smell, taste, and touch, experiences that give us and our memory something to hold on to so that we are better able to remember the One who holds on to us.

It makes sense then that God called those about to rush into the wilderness to grab hold of a walking stick, to feel the weight of their sandals strapped to their feet, to smell the scent of a carefully prepared meal roasting over a fire, and to taste flat bread that was drastically unlike loaves given time to rise. And God called them to tell and re-tell, to share and re-share these rituals with their children and their children's children not simply as an empty show of going through the motions, but rather as a way of keeping the memory alive through all of the tragic turns and joy filled celebrations they experienced.

³ David Marchese interviewing Dr. Charan Ranganath, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/04/magazine/charan-ranganath-interview.html>

At times I have envied our Jewish siblings for their rich rituals and practices. And then I am reminded that we have rich and important rituals that are intended to strengthen and inform our faith, too. Just a few moments ago, we heard the water splash in the font reminding us of baptism. Maybe hearing and seeing the water stream into the font is not enough right now. Maybe you need to come swish your hand in that water after worship today as a tangible reminder of God's unfailing love for you and for everyone else. Next week we will gather at this table for communion as we do every month. As a way of preparing for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, I invite you to spend even a few moments sometime over the next week recalling the taste of the bread and the juice. In the soft square of homemade bread and the tart taste of grape juice may you sense God's Spirit drawing you into the story of our Lord's poignant last supper with his friends and to hear the extravagant promise of a banquet in God's kingdom coming.

God never intended our faith to be purely an academic exercise; faith is not simply a head thing. God knows we need help to hang on to faith when the storms rage, when the diagnosis comes, when the disappointment spirals. God knows we need to be encouraged and strengthened in our core, to have persistent reminders of God's strong hand that led us out of slavery, the strong hand that hangs on to us here and now, the same strong hand that will gather us home when all is said and done. In the meantime, we will pray and ponder and sing God's word, AND we will splash in the water, we will chew the bread, we will savor the juice, and by the unfailing grace of God, we will remember in our core what it is to cling to this One who never lets us go.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.