

**Memory**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Mary Koon**  
**September 3, 2023**

This morning we turn, for a final time, to a theme found in the book, *This Here Flesh*, by Cole Arthur Riley. We will talk about memory.

Today we read from the Old Testament book of Joshua, a book of the bible that is part of the historical writings, the books from Joshua to Esther. But the word “history” doesn’t really tell the whole story.

We understand that when it comes to history, facts and dates do not always give us the entire truth. Scholars agree that the Biblical books of history resist modern categories. Reading all the writings together, we find overlapping versions of the past and archeologists throughout the centuries find discrepancies with biblical dating and evidence. Rather, we must consider these theological stories, containing folklore, legends, poetry, with the overarching message being that God was (and is) committed to the intimate dealings with the descendants of Abraham. God wasn’t an idea for philosophers to expound upon, or something to be studied, but a being to be worshiped and in relationship with. God was part of the ordinary lives of the people, and history was and is the medium through which God works salvation. These writings are meant to increase faith and trust, helping the us all live with fidelity to God, now and in the days to come.

Israel’s earliest historians drew upon oral traditions, stories handed down from family to family, community to community, as well as written sources, and now it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Joshua was Moses' successor, the leader of Israel. It was he who led the people into the promised land after hundreds of years of enslavement in Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the desert.

On the last leg of this journey, the people come to the banks of the Jordan river and set up camp. God tells Joshua to take the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's presence among them, which was held by the priests, and lead the people. The Jordan River was not always flowing, but this time of year it was running fast and high. As soon as the priests carrying the Ark placed their toes in the rushing water, it parted, and the water was held back. The people passed through to the other side. It should remind us of the parting of the Red Sea years before, when God's people escaped from slavery in Egypt to a new life. And now, we pick up the story in Joshua, chapter 4:1–9.

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: <sup>2</sup>‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, <sup>3</sup>and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’’ <sup>4</sup>Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. <sup>5</sup>Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, <sup>6</sup>so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’’ <sup>7</sup>then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever.’ AMEN

What do these stones mean to you?

My father started writing his memoirs when he was 80 years old. In eight years, he created hundreds of pages with scores of stories for his family to read. He also left a stack of poetry he had written, some of which is religious and spiritual. My father's written memories reveal much about his relationship with his parents and my mom, his feelings about life and God. Though I knew my dad well, his writings offer me a deeper, and more intimate knowing. They are something I can show my grandchildren when they ask me, "What was your dad like?"

Cole Arthur Riley writes, "The answers to the biggest questions we have about identity, story, and God can only be answered in relation to memory. Without memory, we are forced to rely solely on ideas and suggestion to make sense of who we are, as opposed to the concrete."

Every community creates collective memories, stories we tell ourselves about who we are and who we want to be. We have those at Oak Grove.

Some of you remember how Uncle Ed would tend gardens with the ladies of the church, or the time that Frank Bliss met the protesters with coffee and a donut instead of anger. Some remember the huge musicals Judy put on, Joseph and Godspell. Or Dave Kachel's sermon with all the shoes. Some remember baptisms in Nine Mile Creek, or worship in the parking lot during Covid. Or even the memory of the sanctuary roof leaking, and the buckets that collected the water. You have many more.

All communities have memories, family, schools, churches, cities, and nations. I've often told the story about where I was when the Twin Towers fell, or Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, or George Floyd was murdered, and you Minnesotans remember that famous Halloween blizzard. Hard stories, and joy-filled ones, too.

Cole Arthur Riley writes, “Collective memory requires that we piece together the fragments of individual memory and behold something not necessarily larger but with greater depth and color. I think the whole Bible is predicated on collective remembrance.”

We can see that this is true.

God places a rainbow in the sky to help us remember God’s promises.

God tells the Hebrews in the desert, forming a nation “Remember the sabbath and keep it holy”

In Deuteronomy, over and over, God tells God’s people, “remember that you were in a slave in the land of Egypt,” or “Remember that you were once a stranger, so don’t exploit other strangers in the land where you reside.”

Riley goes on to talk about “feast days and fast days, storytelling, and most conspicuously, the Eucharist. A shared table and a shared loaf.” The Christian story, she says, hinges on a ceremony of communal remembrance. This should train us toward an embodied memory.”

In the gospel of Luke, as well as other places in the New Testament, we are told that Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to the disciples saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’

When we come to the communion table, we understand it as a memorial to Jesus in our minds and hearts. And we also come, fully embodied beings, to re-member the Christ, as in, to put the body back together again. Nourished by the grain and fruit of the earth, sustained by spiritual and physical food, we rise from the table to be the hands and feet of Christ wherever we go. In remembering, we grow stronger, more compassionate, more like Jesus.

Riley says, “When we practice collective memory, the role of the historian is shared across a dinner table.” When stories are shared between generations, everyone grows wiser.

Those stones in Joshua are just for this purpose. Same with the communion table and elements. God asks us to create a physical reminder to tell the story again and again.

The Bible is a multi-vocal collection of narrative, history, stories, poetry, song, and verse. It is a work of collective memory. Stories handed down from generation to generation. Stories of God’s faithfulness to God’s people even when we humans mess up, reject God’s teachings, and hear God’s call to return. The Bible helps us remember that God is always active in the real lives and history of people.

And today, we continue to look to these ancient stories for solace, wisdom, and inspiration. We read together, trusting that God will speak to us where we are, illuminating a Word for our lives individually and as a church.

Collective memory, Riley reminds us, is a form of resistance. It seeks a truth that is multi-faceted, features a variety of voices, and therefore, is one that can liberate us all from false narratives.

Oak Grove has, and will continue to, seek the truth of the history of our church, our place in Bloomington, and the truth of our world by leaning into the methods of collective memory. In our antiracism work, as we read accounts of historical events, we are aware of who is telling the story. We are learning to habitually ask whose voices are not heard, whose story isn’t told or believed and how we might recover those stories, adding perspective and fresh ways of seeing.

This month we featured an older person in our “Golden Spotlight” section of the Oak Leaves newsletter. The idea comes from Nancy Kachel, who has wanted to do this for years. Each month, Nancy and her team will interview a senior citizen, beginning with our centenarians, so that you can read stories and memories from them, each one playing a unique role in making Oak Grove who we are today.

The Antiracism Advocacy Team hosted an evening with the historian/professor Chad Montrie, who wrote a book on the history of racism in Minnesota. The Session attended a presentation from the Minnesota History Museum about Dakota history in Minnesota. We are excited to begin a closer look at the journals of Gideon and Samuel Pond and Dakota oral tradition in order to add depth and richness to the stories we have already been told about the beginnings of Oak Grove and the city of Bloomington.

Cole Arthur Riley writes that “Memory is meant to be given. It isn’t held well alone. It is meant to be held in a collective and across generations. Memories that remain exclusive to a particular individual or even community are risk of becoming false.”

It is a gift to share memories with people we trust and love, and so important. In instances when memory is lost due to age, illness, trauma, we can lose track of our own stories. We need one another.

It is an adventure to hear the stories of those whom we may not yet know. I hope that we will have lots of opportunities to share stories this fall across generations. This is the heart of faith formation, sharing Biblical and personal stories of God’s goodness, God’s grace, and love and how we’ve experienced it, or longed for it.

I am going to close with a poem that was written by my dad, Howard Colwell. He was a life-long learner, a spiritual seeker, and involved church member. This poem speaks of the importance of religion, faith being dynamic and life-giving. It speaks to me of the challenge to embrace a living faith, one that is bold and willing to listen to explore and stretch. This poem helps me understand why being part of the church, my father's deep spiritual practices, were so important to him. He writes:

A religion which fails to grasp the conscience and imagination of its people is not a religion at all but an empty shell, more, perhaps, like a coral, beautiful to see, but mostly the hardened remains of life long gone.

What memories will we share with the next generation?

What do these stones mean to you?

AMEN

### Sources:

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. Random House, NY, 2022, "Memory," pgs 170-181.

Commentary from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.