

“Telling Stories”

*A Sermon Preached by Dr. Margaret Bendroth at
First Congregational Church of Lebanon*

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Joshua 4: 1-9

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: ‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, 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.” ’ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. 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, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” 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.’

The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

Lebanon is an interesting place. Did you know that in 1877 your town fathers passed a law against coasting? They weren’t Puritan killjoys—the problem was that the young people of your town were sledding down public highways; not a good strategy if you want to produce a next generation of inhabitants. Did you know that dogs helped pay for the education of your town’s citizens? In the 19th century the town levied a dog tax to pay for damage by canines; the extra went toward the school budget. “Dogs are by many considered useless animals,” a town history reads, “but they have a place in the affairs of society and their uses.” It was a good thing, he said,

that though dogs did not go to school themselves, they could “help others to an education by contributing to the school fund.”¹

Or did you know about your town’s hog reeves? Beginning in 1744, Lebanon began an annual selection of hog reeves, “ancient and honorable officers” from the town’s top citizens, whose job it was to keep pigs from running at large—this was a major issue in many colonial towns. One was a member of Congress, two were officers in the Revolution, one was the lieutenant governor and chief justice of Vermont. It got to be a joke after a while, an occasion for “fun and frolic.” “Squeals and grunts of pigs and hogs,” so the record tells us, “were heard in every direction.” In the 1800s the town made it an honorary post for newly married men.

One of my favorite stories concerns that town history itself. It was written by Charles Downs, the pastor of your church from 1849 to 1873. After he resigned the pastorate he went on to be school superintendent, selectman, police judge, town clerk, and then historian. He was commissioned to write the town history in 1880; all of the members of the town history committee died before he finished, in August 1906. Rev. Downs passed away into his own well-deserved eternal rest just a few weeks later, September 20. He is said to have quipped, “I have tried to live so my obituarist would have nothing to say.”

The past is full of stories. In fact, storytelling is the way we remember. Historians are often accused of being obsessed with names and dates, but it’s really the opposite. We remember not bringing up isolated bits of information, but through narratives, episodes, incidents, all with plenty of backstory. When the family is back home after the funeral, they sit together and swap tales. It is a way of keeping the one they’ve lost present in the room for just that much longer.

Story-telling is also profoundly biblical, central to the historic Judeo-Christian tradition. It keeps us grateful, humble, and connected to the full communion of saints, as the Apostles Creed has it. It’s the glue that binds communities together too. And so as you look forward to celebrating your own history this coming year, I want to talk with you about the spiritual practice of story-telling.

We all know that there's a certain kind of storytelling that churches are good at, and I can almost feel pastors shuddering when I bring up the subject. Mrs. Magillicuddy will never forget the time the pastor’s wife walked right by her in coffee

¹ Rev. Charles A. Downs, *History of Lebanon, N.H 1761-1887* (1908)

hour without even saying *anything*, Mr. Bumpkins can't get over the way the building and grounds committee dismissed his idea for a three-story parking garage in the church lot, the pastor lives with simmering resentment over the way Mrs. Magillicuddy and Mr. Bumpkins took it all out on him or her. And many churches live with regret, over missed opportunities, families we let leave, programs we were enthusiastic over at the beginning but let linger and die. That's not Christian remembering.

Remembering as a spiritual practice is life-giving; telling stories about the past strengthens communities, builds common bonds, a sense of solidarity with each other, opens our hearts and minds to the world. Both Christianity and Judaism are, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has called them, "religions of remembrance." In other words we are both basically story-tellers; history for us is not just a hobby, a pastime for "buffs" or people with an insatiable need for useless facts. It's what we do. It's the reason why the Bible is a book of stories about people in the past, a record for us of their lived experience of faith. What is the Passover seder but a re-enactment of a historical event—the same is true for the Lord's Supper, in which we are told to "remember and believe." It is more than just a re-enactment, as history is for us more than a rundown of names and dates and bits of information. It is a story we tell to each other that places us here in the present day in Lebanon, New Hampshire, within a multitude, across time as well as space. We are sharing a story with Christians in first-century Corinth, Elizabethan England, fifteenth-century Japan, twentieth-century Africa.

There's nothing nostalgic about this kind of relationship with the past. When Christ commanded us to celebrate communion "in memory of me," he wasn't suggesting we pull out all the old picture albums and trade our favorite stories about the first century. Remembering for the people of Israel and in the words of Jesus means that we are re-upping our commitment, throwing in our lot with others. We are placing ourselves into a story, into a community of memory, receiving the promise that we are not alone. We are also entering into a story that matters, one that is going to make demands of us.

Thus our story in Joshua: "In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

If you know anything of the background of this story, it's a big moment in Israelite history, when they are finally ending forty long years of wandering the Sinai peninsula and crossing the Jordan into the promised land. The future ahead of them is full of promise, but it will also bring frightening challenges. And it's in this moment that God commands them to stop, literally in the middle of things, and set up a memorial, a pile of stones meant as a message to future generations. It wasn't enough, in other words, just to write it down and put it in the archives—there had to be something concrete, something visible, maybe even something cumbersome and heavy, something that took extra special effort—hauling heavy stones—to make sure the memory did not fade away easily.

There's not a day that goes by, at least between April and October, when I'm reminded that Paul Revere is buried below my window. Somehow everybody who comes across him feels the need to yell "the British are coming." But they also do something else—I look down and see on the monument and on the sidewalk around it, and see that they have left stones behind.

Stones appear in the Bible a fair amount. They are used as altars, even projectiles, and they formed protective walls. Jacob was even using one as a pillow when he had a dream about a ladder reaching up to heaven. They are also used in ancient rituals, as carriers of memory. As we saw in Joshua's story, stones have a religious meaning in Jewish culture, one that goes way back. People left stones on graves for practical reasons, to mark a corpse, to make sure no one unknowingly stumbled upon a spot of ground that was ritually unclean. But they were also there to allow the grieving to come back, to keep up a connection with someone who was gone, but should not be forgotten. Stones weigh down a soul that might otherwise drift away—it keeps the dead from forgetting about us. They also are a symbol of permanence. Unlike flowers, our object of choice in cemeteries, stones do not wither and dry up. They are always there, no matter what.

We come from a tradition with deep reservations about ritual. Our Puritan ancestors have been criticized a lot for being intolerant and nit-picky, and perhaps with justification. But that's not what they were really about—they wanted to keep religion clear and simple—no stained glass, choir lofts, ministers' robes, crosses, incense. They wanted religion to be fresh, immediate, unencumbered by rote forms and mindless repetition. Churches needed to be as bare and plain as possible, worship services as straightforward as they could be, so that nothing would get in God's way.

Is there a way to keep that idea, really the genius of our tradition, and have some regular practices that keep us from being so present-minded, so easily forgetful about the people who have minded and built this church for the last 250 years?

Are there practices, habits, you could keep, almost like a string around the finger, to bring to mind the people who established both of the congregations you represent, both of the religious traditions? How will you maintain the continuity with the past? And what will you tell those lined up to take our places? How will they learn your story?

Not all stories are cute and happy ones of course. One of my favorites, and I'm pretty sure it's also true, is about a church celebrating an anniversary. They had a story about themselves that they'd been telling for a long time, about how long ago a group of troublemakers roiled the congregation and eventually left in a huff. That meant that the members who stayed were a righteous remnant, holding the faith when things got rough. But then their anniversary came around and someone read the minutes from the previous meeting – actually delved into their history. They discovered that instead of troublemakers leaving, the congregation had forced them out. They were the kicker-outers, not the righteous remnant. So now, they have a ritual. When things start to get tense in a church meeting (it happens), someone quietly gets up, goes to the door and slams it. It's a reminder to them that what they did once, they could do again.

What would our ancestors wonder about if they could see us today? They'd probably wonder why my sermon is going to finish so soon (and of course about my gender) and why we aren't coming back for another two hour sermon after lunch. They'd be astonished that most of us can't tell the difference between a Presbyterian and a Congregationalist, much less an Episcopalian and a Catholic.

But I think they'd also wonder why we don't tell more stories about our history, whether we have any idea of how much we owe to them and to others—all the things they've given us: songs to sing, pews to sit in, books and ideas that inspire us, the names and layout of our streets. Novelist Wendell Barry calls this a “long choosing,” that we and our world are the result of the thousands of decisions by other people, about who to marry and where to live, what to care about.

I think it's going to take a lot of rethinking and undoing of old spiritual habits before we can break through all the layers of indifference, condescension, and

confusion that have accumulated around faith and history over so many years. We can start just by saying thank you, acknowledging over and over again that we are not making all of this stuff up as we go along, but are stewards of memory for our ancestors in the faith—and for generations still ahead.

In a way we are talking about remaking our Christian imagination so that we can see the cloud of witnesses around us, recover an older language of faith. "Seeing dead people," as I sometimes call it, is a profoundly countercultural act—it can be scary and uncomfortable, and a little weird sometimes too—but it's not optional and it's not something you have to do every twenty-five or fifty years. It's the responsibility, promise, and adventure of our Christian faith.