



Remembering History
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost A 8/23/20
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard: in the Name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.

Summer is often a time when we spend more time with our families, especially perhaps our extended families. Even in this pandemic time, I know of folks who have traveled across many states so that grandparents and grandchildren can spend time together, so cousins can get reacquainted, and so forth.

These gatherings can be a time when family memories are shared, when ancient and profound—as well as more recent and silly—family lore is dispensed and shared.

I invite you to spend a moment to consider the diversity of perspectives present in the narrative in our family histories.

Maybe it's an informal history, the oral lore of things.

Maybe it's with regard to just a small bit of that narrative, and maybe a bit silly, as in: "Remember how you loved being tickled until you screamed?" In fact, you didn't love it; you hated it.

Or more seriously, "Remember how Dad was gone a lot on business trips?" In fact, he wasn't gone on business; he was an alcoholic and he was often absent on a bender.

Or maybe it's a more formal history, a genealogy researched by a family member and written down.

For example, my maternal great grandfather, the Rev. Dr. Augustus Waldo Drury of Dayton, Ohio, drew up a little pamphlet in 1926 about his ancestors. It purports to link his kin to those present for the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. In 1963, it was updated in the handwriting of one of his daughters, my grandmother Ruth, my mother's mother, to include my birth.

Augustus Drury took the trouble periodically to insert some commentary in the genealogy, such as "one cannot fail to be impressed by their sturdy stock, adventurous spirit, religious faith, and strength of purpose."¹

Family stories are so often connected to origin stories, which claim to tell us something about where we came from—and why we are where we are today.

As William Faulkner once wrote, "the past is never dead; it isn't even past." (*Requiem for a Nun*)

¹ A.W. Drury Data for the Drury and Bookwalter Families prepared for his children and in memory of their mother, Sophia B. Drury. Dayton, Ohio: September 1926.



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Knowing our history –whether our family history, or the history of our nation, makes a difference in how we understand ourselves as individuals and as a nation. Forgetting that history, or being ignorant of its diversity and fullness, deprives us of the rich complexity of our identity as humans created in the image of God.

Our history, fully understood, should be a source of both pride and humility. Our history shapes not only how we understand our past, but also how we imagine the possibilities and demands of the future.

The Bible takes history very, very seriously. In fact, you could call the Bible a history of human salvation, a record of the attempts of God and humans to bridge the *gap* between us and God that has afflicted us since the very beginning of human history.

As we know from the book of Genesis, the Bible begins with a theological understanding of how the world came to be. “And God said.... Let there be light...” We heard the creation story early this summer in the lectionary.

Scripture continues with a so-called “universal history,” archetypal stories about Adam and Eve and the serpent and the arrival of evil, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, some genealogies, God’s attempts to reconnect, the tower of Babel and so forth.

Against this background of a broken and divided humanity, our Scripture zeros in on the story of a particular people—the Jewish people.

This summer, we’ve had a few selections in the lectionary from that sometimes humorous, sometimes tragic, sometimes inspiring, narrative of the function and dysfunction of the first family of Judaism and Christianity: Abraham and Sarah hosting the mysterious strangers; the rivalry between Jacob and Esau; Jacob wrestling with the angel; and most recently, we heard about Joseph and his brothers, who – by the grace of God and the generous forgiveness and power of Joseph, friend of Pharaoh—have landed in the land of Egypt and will be safe, and fed, despite their treachery.

This wonderful story of Joseph and his brothers is also an example of the way history can be redeemed—as Joseph forgave his brothers, by the grace of God, he was able to reframe their history of treachery as an opportunity for a gracious God to exercise providential, saving action.

This morning we come to an important transition in this history in the book of Exodus. A people is about to become a nation.

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

Clearly there had been a change in the dynastic structure of Egypt.
But it’s more than simply that the new Pharaoh didn’t know Joseph.

He didn't know Joseph's God, the God of Israel, but he would soon learn.

The story we have this morning is remarkable. Whether it is actually verifiable in the way a modern historian would write history is beside the point.

It has been revered as Sacred History, as the Salvation History of our people for 1000s of years. And for good reason: it is the opening act of a drama of resistance by the powerless, who overcome evil with the power of God. And Scripture has been the inspiration for countless humans to do just that—to overcome evil by the power of God.

Three unnamed, and two named women—Puah and Shiprah—ensure the survival of the leader who will lead the Israelites out of slavery and forge them into a nation. This is Moses, of course.

The women engage in a powerful dance of subversion. All of them know that they are supposed to kill this infant. And yet, amazingly, he ends up being saved by his big sister, nursed by his mother, and raised by the Princess in the Pharaoh's palace, safe and sound.

These are small, singular, yet stunningly courageous actions.

One commentator has quipped that Puah and Shiprah in particular “commit the first known instance of civil disobedience.”²

This is no small thing. As we know, because we know the story ends in liberation from Egypt, these small actions have a mighty impact.

Some have called this story an example of the Butterfly Effect. The Butterfly Effect is a theory suggesting that a small action or variable can have massive consequences that are not predictable. It comes from a scholarly paper written in the 1960s by an MIT professor and popularized in the 1980s in a best-selling book by called *Chaos: Making a New Science*—³ Chaos is not randomness; it's just that the consequences can't necessarily be known in advance.

The passage from the Gospel this morning also speaks to family history. It speaks to an origin story of our Church, to the founding moment of our family, our movement, the People of the Way. It includes the first appearance of the word “church” in Matthew's Gospel; in Greek, it is the word *ekklesia*, literally “gathering.”

² Francine Klagburn, Voices of Wisdom cited in “Puah,” Wikipedia, accessed 2020.8.21

³ Peter Dizikes “MIT Technology Review” <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/422809/when-the-butterfly-effect-took-flight/> accessed 2017.8.25



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In the Roman Catholic Church, this passage has been pointed to as a sign of the primacy of Peter's leadership in the early church, and the origin of the apostolic lineage that developed into the Papacy, Pope Francis being the most recent occupant of the chair of St. Peter.

For all Christians, this story of Peter is part of our family history. It is an origin story of personal faith in Jesus, faith that is both wobbly and bold; both cowardly and brave; apparent in both small things and in large; that is, it is a living faith, full of as many questions and as answers, as many challenges and as reassurances. It's a relationship, between us and the Living God, in Jesus Christ.

Our Scriptures this morning I think help us in a number of ways to think about history and our living relationship with it.

First: they emphasize the power of usually powerless people—the nameless and named women; Peter, a simple fisherman. By contrast, many of us were raised on histories that emphasized the perspectives of the winners or those with power, or who wanted to maintain power. Only in the more recent past in our country, have we been exposed more fully to the richness of human history and the power of ordinary people to make a difference.

Much of our history has been literally whitewashed, not only by race but by gender and class. Most recently, you'll recall we are marking the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote, historians have brought to light the critical, pivotal and little known (at least beyond the scholarly community) roles of black women, as well as lesbians, in bringing about that historic change to our Constitution. We have to note that even so, it would take another generation for women (and men) of color to actually exercise the vote. We can thank John Lewis, among others, for that.

Connected to this is the urgency that our Salvation history be told truthfully so as to be liberating Good News for all people, the powerless AND the powerful, even and especially those who need to be liberated from hatred.

The Bible has many competing voices in it, not unlike our own histories. While the narrative is often violent, patriarchal, sexist and racist, there are also so many instances, so many instances, as with this morning, when it is powerfully iconoclastic and liberating. While the Bible holds these many voices and narratives in tension, it is *clear* that the arc of history in our salvation story bends toward liberation and justice and compassion.

Lifting up the inconvenient truths about our national narrative are connected to this. Our national reckoning with Civil War monuments, for example, which glorify the white South or valorize the extermination of native peoples as part of that war—or, lest we in the north feel smug, we need only to travel over to Medford to see the Royall House, home to as many as 60 enslaved Africans before the



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Revolutionary War—all of this reminds us that our family national history is messy, just as our sacred history is. But it contains within it, when we dig up the truth and expose it to the light, the seeds of healing and justice and compassion.

As we look at our histories, our origin stories, our sacred narratives—family, national, and sacred—we ask God to help us to face the truths that are contained there.

We ask this because we know that the truth sets us free.

We ask this because we know that our truest and deepest identity is as children of the living God: created in God's image; redeemed by the Son, Jesus; and empowered by the Spirit.

And that no matter how messy, when we join in the search for the truth, the love, power, and justice of God prevail.

AMEN.