

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Layers of Memory"
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The physical life that we have been given is an amazing one. With all the medical and scientific advances that we have achieved, which are many, nevertheless, the wonder of how live, perceive and remember is still not fully comprehended. On this third area of memory, we know lots more than we used to about the brain. But we still don't really understand the narrative structure of consciousness. We remember. We live our lives basing one memory upon another, building emotion, reflection, language. Our sense of life and well being comes from our mothers. Our fathers help us separate from mother and form our own identities. Our memories form layer upon layer and our independence or interdependence develops.

Some memories are repeated often. What we do regularly and often can rightly be called routine, and when it involves the supernatural, we call it religion. Dreams are often repeated and some believe they have something to do with the filing of the bits and bytes of our memories in our great super computer called the brain, with its many gigabytes or terabytes of information capacity.

One of the acts of memory that we often use involves our parents and grandparents, or whoever brought us up. We remember their lives, their sayings, their passions, their warnings and teachings. Sometimes we remember their faults and lacks. My father was in the merchant marine in the Second World War. It changed and formed his life, and most of the young men of his generation. Our family life, my life, was formed in part by his experience of the war. The World Wars changed the course of history right when so much optimism about our technological abilities was peaking in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As wireless technology, aviation, and all kinds of other advances began to foment human pride and even the thought that heaven on earth was possible, then came the dark side of those with aspiration for world domination. Germany, Japan, Italy and some others decided they wanted more. And thus was launched on the heels of the depressions a war machine that was countered by others' war machines.

And our loved ones were lost, fighting for the freedom they believed in. We remember here in Newfoundland those who gave more than their fair share.

I must add that the practice of having Remembrance Day or Armistice Day services in the west and central Canada, at least where we have lived, have only been celebrated at the cenotaph or the war memorial in town. Apparently it is only in Atlantic Canada that the church celebrates and remembers with something like what we experienced today at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, or the Sunday which comes before it. Although if you know differently, please tell me.

And so we remember. And in the Scriptures, there are acts of remembrance as well. Haggai who because of his precise recording of time, we know wrote about events taking place between August and December of 520 B.C., asked the question, "Who can remember what the temple used to be like?" I suppose it would be like asking you what you remember about the physical appearance of the Queens Road Church in the early 1940s. It had been 66 years since the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Some of the older amongst the congregation remembered the former glory of the temple, in cedar, bronze, silver and gold. In Haggai's time, his prophetic message was that people were so busy getting their own homes renovated and restored that they no longer cared about the Lord's temple, the building to which they came to worship God. And so besides the challenge to the people to give to make sure God's work and place was well provided for, there was also a promise to make sure they knew that the new state of what God was building would surpass the golden age of Solomon. And certainly in Jesus Christ, this promise is fulfilled.

And then in the Psalm 98, we hear the Psalmist remind us that the Lord remembers His faithfulness and love and so we remember His faithfulness and love in songs of praise, today and every time we meet.

And Paul talks to the Thessalonians to remind them about what he had taught because people were choosing unusual innovations in their faith. Someone was teaching in the church that the Lord had already returned and was doing something different than what Paul had taught them. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter." (2 Thessalonians 2:15) And in our day, just as in Paul's, there are churches that are innovating in saying they no longer believe in the Apostles' Creed, or that there is no longer any Gospel to preach, only the value of love and universal toleration and respect. But we too must stand firm against

innovations in the essentials of the faith, while allowing and caring for others in the non-essentials.

Jesus was trying to teach even his opponents when he told them that there was not going to be any more marriage in heaven. He was instructing them on a point they didn't even believe in, that is the existence of an after life. He told them that we will be like the angels who don't marry, but live forever in the presence of God. It will be a new life with some continuity from this life, but different, in that there will be no more sin, no more rebellion against God, no more crime, full justice and complete peace.

God knows of this future, and treats those who have died believing in Him, as the living, because God sees the whole of time and experiences the whole of time, whereas we live sequentially, and do not know the future. So Jesus instructs on God's memory which unlike ours takes in all past, present and future at once. This is not an experience that we have because we are not God.

And yet we honour God this day. We remember.

Someone once asked me (over ten years ago now) how long we will continue these services, in reference to the cultural Armistice Day ones that are attended in the town square, at the cenotaph or at the war memorials. I answered that I didn't know.

But no matter what happens in this regard in the culture or in the church, we still will remember, because God Himself brings to mind those who have been a part of the community here.

On a somewhat related but different matter, I'd like you to know that there is a difference in how the dead are honored in this country. Many people here have a three day visitation (some people call it a wake) with many hours in the funeral home. In central Canada, I found that there were visitations, but rarely three days worth. The farther west we went, the less visitation there was. In Saskatchewan, there would be a funeral and interment even in -40 degree weather in the winter, but very little visitation.

In BC, there are no visitations, and even when one family from the east wanted to have a visitation in the funeral home, they found that no one showed up. This was a shock to them. In fact, on the west coast currently

people are more and more stating in their wills that they want no service whatsoever, no funeral, no memorial service, no nothing.

Of course, families still need to make this decision once their loved one is gone. What would you do? Would you honor what that family member requested or would you go ahead and have a service so that those that cared for the family member would have some chance for closure? These are difficult questions and difficult times. Differences in culture and in how we respect those who have died come up time and time again.

I trust that whenever we have a chance to work through these difficult decisions, that we will work together to honour those who are gone and to do the right thing, but above all to trust God and to look to Jesus for the creative solutions that are needed in the post-Christian era in which we live.

Let us pray.