

The Command to Remember

Deuteronomy 8:1-20

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Memorial Day is a time for remembering the sacrifice that fellow countrymen have made for our sake. Surely the command to remember is not controversial. Families and communities that have lost loved ones in wars do not want to forget.

But when Deuteronomy commands us to remember, it is telling us to remember correctly. The command is not just to remember as opposed to forgetting, but to remember as opposed to making up our own version of history. Remember that you did not get to the Promised Land on your own. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember that it was the Lord your God who brought you out. Do not say to yourself, “I did this myself” or “We managed to escape Egypt” or “We built this great country.”

That is the point of the creed we read earlier from Deuteronomy 26. When the Israelites came to offer their offering of thanksgiving from the harvest, they were to recite the history of their nation. That history was the substance of their faith. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” It is part of our sense of ourselves to say that we were not born here. “We started as wanderers living in Syria when God called us. Eventually we went down to Egypt and lived there as aliens, and then as slaves, treated harshly and oppressed. But it was the Lord who heard us, saw us, and brought us out with mighty deeds. The Lord brought us here and gave us this land. All this that I bring now as an offering I have because the Lord saved us, so I give back to him from what he has given to me.”

There are alternative histories that could have been told, for example: “We have always been God’s favorites. We believe in Israelite exceptionalism. We are smarter than Egyptians. We work harder than other countries. We have higher moral values than other countries, and that’s why we are prosperous.” But Moses will allow none of that. Over and over he says “Remember that you were slaves.” That is the real story. We come from nothing. We were once a weak people with no freedom. It was God who took us from slavery and gave us freedom—and everything about this nation is a gift.

Memorial Day began on May 30, 1868, as a day to decorate the graves of the 620,000 who died in the Civil War. The officer who first proclaimed the day said that it was a day to honor “those who died in defense of the country during the late rebellion.” But from the beginning there was a ceremony at Arlington Cemetery to honor those who died on both sides of the war.

This year marks 150 years since the beginning of the Civil War, the most terrible thing that ever happened to this country. It is worth remembering that the unity of our nation is not a given. There have always been those who would be willing to sacrifice our oneness as a people in order to preserve their particular values. Time magazine had a cover story on the anniversary of Fort Sumter asking why we are still fighting the Civil War—and fighting over why it happened.

Soon after the war was over, Southerners began to talk about the Glorious Cause that had gone down to defeat, and Northerners were willing to let them talk that way in order to reunite the country. The truth was that the war was always about slavery, and no one denied it at the time. But over time the content of what we remember changes. A recent poll revealed that two

thirds of white people in the Southern states that made up the Confederacy said that the Civil War was about States' Rights, not slavery. The story told by the Klan, by Strom Thurmond, and by George Wallace has carried the day.

When we moved from New Jersey to Kentucky, and northern Kentucky at that, just barely Southern, my son Nathan could not believe that people still flew the Confederate flag. "Wait a minute," he'd ask. "Isn't that treasonous? Doesn't that mean you want to take down the government of the United States?" 14 states still observe Confederate Memorial Day. It's one thing to honor the war dead, and another to honor the Glorious Cause of preserving an economy that depended on slavery.

If we are going to observe the command to remember, we had better remember what really happened in war, not our own version of it. When we remember the Civil War dead, we need to tell the story true: We stole Africans and sold them. We sold them right here in Newport. New York City was built by slave labor. New England textile mills ran on cotton grown by slaves. But some in the North heard God saying that slavery was a sin and repented. At the same time, the South, grown wealthier than the north on the basis of the slave economy, heard God saying that slavery was a blessing to the Africans and a boon to the country. In the end, God brought a terrible judgment on both North and South.

That was the understanding of Abraham Lincoln. He said in his second inaugural address that God "gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came." We pray that the war will end soon, he said, "yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword...it still must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" In 1863 Lincoln proclaimed a national fast day, asking "May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted on us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People?" But the North and the South both came to believe self-justifying stories about themselves which denied that sin had anything to do with it.

When Moses stood before the people of Israel about to enter the Promised Land, he warned them. Remember the long journey to this point. Remember how the Lord your God led you these forty years. Remember not just that he saved you, but that he humbled you. He fed you and he starved you both. He put you through hard times so that you would learn that you do not live by bread alone but by his word. Once you are no longer hungry, do not forget that. You spend forty years in the desert because you were stubborn and rebellious. Don't forget his discipline.

But now, Moses said, hard times are over. You are about to go into a good land, a land of milk and honey, with plenty of water and grain and fruit. But be careful that you do not forget how you got there. Remember, like the turtle on the fencepost, that you didn't get here by yourself. Don't forget the God who brought you out of slavery. Do not construct an alternative history for yourself, saying "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." No they didn't! It was the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery. Without him you'd be in Egypt. It was the Lord your God who gave you the ability to get wealth.

Lincoln echoed Deuteronomy 8 in his fast day proclamation in 1863:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten

the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us!

I scarcely need to make an application of those words to today. Whenever I hear politicians of either party making the mandatory faith-statement that this is the greatest nation on the face of the earth, I think to myself: “We have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.” I want to ask David Roosa, just back from Haiti, if he thinks that we are morally superior to the Haitians who were the victims of slavery when we were the beneficiaries of it. Lincoln understood self-sufficiency as a sin, but we adopt it as a goal. We can’t imagine how God could get along without us. Lincoln never called Americans to being proud of their country as a Christian nation; he called them to repentance.

But these words in Deuteronomy are not only for nations. Moses is talking to each of us. Beware, when you receive blessings, when you get comfortable, when you have stuff to be proud of—beware lest you think to yourself, “I’ve done pretty well for myself.” That is the deadliest of sin. Remember that it was the Lord who brought you to this place. Remember that it was the Lord who gave you the power to get anything you have.

We make up stories about ourselves to create a sense of self. Usually those stories make us look better than we really were. They make us seem more in charge of our destiny than we ever really were. Let’s be honest. None of us got here on our own steam. We were the recipients of so many gifts along the way from other people. But far more importantly we are the recipients of grace.

The story of my life is not that I am a victim or a victor. I am a person who has received God’s undeserved favor. The truth of my life is that I used to be a slave—I was a slave to the dominant culture of my Egypt, I was a slave to my body’s appetites, I was a slave to pride. I was given a script with this story: you’re a wonderful boy; you are smart; you are gifted; you can do anything. At some point in your life you come to understand that no matter how smart you are you are still in chains. You cannot become who you are intended to be or who you want to be. You are trapped in a system and a nature that are all screwed up.

But the story does not end there, and that too I must remember. God heard my cries, he saw my struggles, and he came down in the person of Jesus to set me free, to lead me out of slavery and into freedom. That’s the language that the Jew Paul uses to describe what happened when he was set free from his religious life into a life of real freedom. Before he met Jesus, Paul had a way of explaining his life as righteous, but when he met Jesus he realized that he was blind and trapped in a system that could never give him freedom.

Charles Wesley told the story of his life in the words of a hymn:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s might.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Beware, lest when you are free, you say to yourself, my spirit and my mind have gotten me this freedom. It is the Lord your God who heard your cries and saw your chains. It is the Lord who

led you out with his own suffering and the mighty power of his resurrection. It is the Lord who has led you through this great and terrible wilderness, made water flow, and fed you with bread you did not know.

When you remember, remember the truth. And when you remember, give thanks.