

#### THEME VERSES

- 1 Corinthians 11:17–34
- Luke 22:7–23
- Exodus 16:1–3
- Numbers 11:4–6

#### OPENING PRAYER

God of all our beginnings, you breathed over the waters of the world at creation and awakened each of us to life. We praise you for your faithfulness to us from generation to generation. Stir up in us, by the power of your Holy Spirit, the holy memory that reminds us that you are our God, and we are your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.

#### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

This Bible study offers time estimates for each section. While some groups will complete the entire Bible study, others meet for a shorter period of time and may appreciate the flexibility to designate some sections for individual use at a later time

# Holy time

## Session one

Holy memory: Why we remember, and how God re-members us

BY MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI

### INTRODUCTION (2 minutes)

This three-session Bible study focuses on the theme of “holy time.” Holy time is, first and foremost, God’s time. It is the mystery and promise that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Yet the incarnation of God in Jesus, God’s entrance into human history, means that the God of eternity is also present with us in our times. God is a part of our pasts, presents and futures. As Paul proclaimed to the people of Athens, “The God who made the world and everything in it...made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:24–28).

Holy time is also how we “live and move and have our being” in God as we live out our faith in relationship to the times of our lives: through acts of memory that re-member us as God’s people (September), through recognizing and responding to God’s grace in the now (October), and through reimagining the future in the light of God’s reign (November).

This month, we begin by looking at holy memory, or how the Bible encourages God’s people to remember God’s story and our own. Why does

remembrance play a central role in Christian worship and living? What is the difference between faithful tradition and nostalgia? How does a great cloud of witnesses from our past continue to shape us?

#### MEMORY WORK (10 minutes)

My Aunt Ann, an American of Japanese descent, was raised a Buddhist. Not long after I became a pastor, she admitted to me that there was something she had never understood about religion—neither her parents' Buddhism nor my own Christianity. "Why do people get together every week just to do the same things over and over?" she wondered.

Another aunt, a member of a nondenominational Christian tradition, chimed in: "Oh, that's why you should try a church like mine. We don't do all that rote stuff. Our worship is different every week!" The conversation moved on before I could respond, but as the years have gone by, I've often pondered Ann's question.

There is another name for what is happening when people "do the same things over and over" week after week and year after year: remembering. Memory is at the heart of most of our human rituals and traditions—not only weekly worship or religious festivals, but also birthdays and anniversaries, reunions and retirement parties. Memory forms a part of traditions that develop in churches, families and cultures. Repeatable rituals are part of human life, from a traditional Thanksgiving menu or the clinking of glasses at a wedding to the liturgy of prayers at a graveside. Special, recognizable, repeatable rituals are part of human life. The specifics of these traditions vary, but the role of tradition itself is the same: to remind us of where we came from and how we arrived at the present moment. Remembering is how we find our place in an ongoing story. We remember who we are and whose we are.

Memory is far more than a lack of forgetting. Let's consider memory. It's an activity, something we do with a purpose, as in Jesus' instructions at the

Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). It engages our whole bodies through our senses. Consider the way that the sound of cicadas or lapping waves, the smell of rain or fresh baked bread, or the feel of grass or sand beneath our feet can instantly transport us to another time, recalling moments from our past and making them present to us again. In fact, this is what the word "remember" means: an action of bringing or calling to mind something that is past (Macmillan Dictionary).

Memory is also shared. It often works through recalling ("Remember when?") or retelling ("Let me tell you about the time...") memories with others. In doing so, bringing the past into the present, we recognize how our identities are intimately connected to the experiences, relationships and lessons of the past—and how we are connected to others.

The work of memory is never perfect. It's not always easy. Nostalgia can tempt us to remember the past selectively—to create a vision in our minds of "good old days" that never truly existed and that the present can never live up to. We may discover that our memories stand in contrast to those of our neighbors. The times we remember with fondness may have carried pain for others, or vice-versa, because of the different circumstances we faced. Some memories are especially painful. Even if we learned or grew from those experiences, recalling them can be as pleasant as sitting on a cactus. As many of us know, especially those living with memory impairment—their own or that of a loved one—the capacity for memory is not a given. When a loved one's memories fray and fade, something of who they once were can seem lost. Nevertheless, love can still remain, even when human memory is gone, perhaps in part because we seek to remember our beloved ones even when they cannot remember themselves. We not only remember them. We remember for them.

Memory—however frail, flawed and finite—is central to Christian worship and identity. Memory

is also a place of holy awe. God of the universe, of all places and of all times, is present with us in our remembering. God also remembers (and re-mem- bers) us. So this month, we will turn to Scripture to ponder the role of memory for our faith today. How and why do we remember? What does it mean for memory to be holy?

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Think back to one of your earliest memories. Is it connected to a certain image, sound, smell, taste or touch? Who else was present? How did you feel?
2. Identify a major historical event for which most of your group was alive. Where were you and what were you doing when you heard the news? For those who did not experience the event firsthand, what was it like to hear or learn about this event from the stories of others?

**WORSHIP AS AN ACT OF MEMORY (2 minutes)**

■ **Read:** Luke 22:7-23, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. What examples of memory do you see or hear in these readings?
4. What personal memories do these words call to mind for you?

“In the night in which he was betrayed...” How many of us, when we hear these words, see in our minds the upraised arms of a pastor holding aloft the bread or the chalice, feel our hands outstretched to receive the meal, or taste it on our tongues?

In gathering together for the Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples engage in a central memory practice of their Jewish faith: remembering the Exodus, when God freed God’s people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). For Christians, the final Passover meal shared by Jesus and the disciples before his death takes on new significance in our shared memory as the Last Supper, the basis for the sacrament of Holy Communion. The words of our communion liturgy even today use the words of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, reminding us that every communion meal connects us to the Christians who have gone before us. Paul himself, writing decades after the time of Jesus, acknowledges that he is passing on the living memory of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. For Paul, what happens in communion is not just a pale echo of the past: what is past becomes present “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,” and it extends into the future as we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The reformer Martin Luther grounded his theology of the sacraments in this same belief: That when people in worship hear the word and participate in the sacraments, these habits are not just symbolic recollections of past happenings that are now over. They are happening now. Communion, for example, is “the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink” (Small Catechism, *ELW*, p. 1166). Holy Communion is not only bread and wine, but also the Spirit’s presence within the people gathered, the act of eating and drinking together, and the time and space in which it happens. Holy Communion is an event of living memory, and what makes it alive—what makes it holy—is God’s presence, incarnate in the living Word, Jesus Christ. We do not merely remember God; God shows up! The remembrance that Jesus commands and Paul instructs is not just something we hear and think about. We also

participate in it. God makes us a part of it. God claims each of us as a member of a living body of memory—Christ’s body. Re-mem-ber—a word that is the opposite of dis-mem-ber—is a word with bodily implications. God re-mem-ber us, making us whole again in ourselves, making us members of the body of Christ. What might it mean to be “re-mem-bered” by God?

#### RE-MEMBERING “THE BODY” (20 minutes)

■ **Read:** 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 and 27-34

#### Share aloud or reflect:

5. What seems to be happening in this community? What is Paul’s advice to them?
6. How can community help... or further complicate memory?

For centuries, Christian churches have struggled to interpret Paul’s words to the Corinthians, and not all have come to the same conclusions. Especially puzzling is Paul’s warning that “all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Corinthians 11:29). Paul is adamant that this is a situation to be avoided at all costs, even suggesting that illness and death have resulted from some in the Corinthian community who have failed to discern the body! What does Paul mean? Some Christians argue that “discerning the body” is about correctly understanding how communion works—in other words, remembering the right theology about the presence of Christ in the elements. This is the reasoning for the practice of closed communion (inviting only members of the same church or tradition to the table) in some Christian traditions.

Without minimizing the importance of the holy mystery of the meal, let’s consider the greater

context of this letter. Paul is concerned that the church in Corinth is facing disunity and conflict (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). This is why Paul reminds the Corinthians that the church is one body with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-14) and why he exhorts the community to remember that love is the foundation of their unity (1 Corinthians 13). Why does this matter? When Paul writes about “eating or drinking without discerning the body,” he refers to a situation in which “when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (1 Corinthians 11:21). Now it’s possible that what Paul describes here is a communal meal, not unlike a potluck. Certainly, that the intention was for everyone present to have brought something for the table—but some, likely the wealthier members, are keeping what they have brought for themselves rather than sharing it, consuming to the point of excess and becoming “drunk” while others do not have enough. In other words, when members of the community forget their neighbors, they forget the meal’s purpose as holy sharing: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Social divisions, factions and inequality don’t just make for an awkward meal; they go against the very nature of the meal itself as a sharing in Christ. Forgetting, in this case, is a dual form of neglect: neglect of neighbor and neglect of the meal’s true purpose. Forgetting to discern the body of Christ in community is a sin because it causes pain to those who are left out and left behind. So Paul urges the Corinthians to remember the true meaning of the tradition he “handed on” to them. He asks them to “discern the body” by remembering one another in generosity when they come together (1 Corinthians 11:33). Paul hopes these acts of holy memory will

lead to holy re-membering, where the body of Christ comes back together in unity.

As we read this, it can be easy to shake our heads in superiority: Those selfish Corinthians. Can you believe what Paul had to put up with? But Paul's warning includes today's church too. Where are we subject to the sin of forgetting to "discern the body" as we gather for worship and in ministry? In the body of Christ, whose bodies have often been excluded or forgotten? Are those with more wealth or social status, perhaps those who write the biggest checks for the offering plate, treated as more important than those who have less? Is there an "in-crowd" of people so comfortable and familiar with one another that others are treated like outsiders? Where does the church need to be reminded that we are one body in Christ? Where does the church need to be re-membered by God?

We don't need to fear asking these questions. The Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness is placed in our liturgy for this very reason: It is a way for us to remember the full picture of our history before God, so that we may find both forgiveness and healing for the body. We voice these words together: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

#### REMEMBER EGYPT? (20 minutes)

■ **Read:** Exodus 16:1-3, Numbers 11:4-6

#### Share aloud or reflect:

7. Have you ever felt nostalgic, and then discovered things weren't quite as you remembered?

8. What are some of the differences between nostalgia and tradition?

I can just picture it: The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, when someone turns to a neighbor and says wistfully, "Remember Egypt?" In Scripture, both Exodus and Numbers tell the story of a people freed from slavery, who on the way to the promised land nevertheless grumble and complain. This, too, I can picture: "Sure, in Egypt we were slaves—but remember the pots of stew and the bread?"

We might laugh at the absurdity of the Israelites' selective memory, recasting their oppression in Egypt as a time of luxurious feasting. Yet can we honestly claim that we have never been guilty of looking backward with rose-colored glasses? The biblical record makes an important point about human memory and its limitations—in particular, the danger of nostalgia.

"Nostalgia," a term coined in the 17th century, was a medical description for the overwhelming longing for home and for the past experienced by soldiers fighting abroad. Like homesickness, nostalgia was originally considered an ailment of the mind and emotions. It later acquired some positive connotations as an appreciation of the past.

We might ask: What's wrong with a little nostalgia? Isn't it a kind of thankfulness for our history and an honoring of past generations?

Perhaps the most important difference between memory and nostalgia is that nostalgia wants not only to honor the past, but to return to it. Nostalgia can turn faithful memory into false memory, so that people are stuck in the past. As the Israelites in the wilderness reminisce fondly about Egypt, conveniently forgetting the hardships and injustice they faced there, they create a false memory of the "good old days" of fleshpots and fish. The daily struggle of wilderness living can't possibly compete with a perfection that never was. God offers abundant gifts

to these wandering people: freedom, a chance for a new life and a promise to sustain them for as long as their journey will take. But nostalgia keeps them from recognizing these present gifts and following God into the future.

Nostalgia can also become an obstacle in our call to love our neighbor. God urges: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34). Forgetting the reality of their time in Egypt puts the Israelites in danger of treating vulnerable people among them harshly, out of a sense of entitlement, rather than treating them with the same dignity and care the Israelites themselves were once denied.

In a July 26, 1989 interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, theologian Jaroslav Pelikan alluded to this kind of nostalgia among modern-day Christians. Pelikan made a distinction between tradition and traditionalism: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time..."

As Alice, a member of my former congregation, often said, "The seven last words of the church are, 'We've never done it that way before.'"

The caution against traditionalism—or nostalgia—is clear. But what does the role of tradition, the ongoing remembrance that marks "the living faith of the dead," look like? Maybe a little like a tree. When we are rooted in the past, rather than trapped by it, we can grow upward, outward and onward. We can remember the whole story of who we were and who we are in ways that also free us, by God's grace, to grow toward what we can be.

### **JESUS, REMEMBER ME (10 minutes)**

Too many of us have experienced the heartbreaking progression of a loved one's memory loss, from forgetting details, names and dates to forgetting beloved family members and, in the end, forgetting oneself. In some sense, all human memory—like all human faith—is limited and finite. Luther acknowledges this as well: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith" (Small Catechism, *ELW*, p. 1162).

Although acts of memory form a large part of our lives of faith, the truth remains: If holy memory were dependent on us, we would be lost.

But it's not.

The good news of the gospel is not that we can be saved if only we remember the right things. The good news is that we belong to a God who remembers us—and who re-memembers us as individuals and as a community of faith. God calls us, enlightens us and sends us into the world as members of Christ's body, to love and serve God and our neighbors. Every time we forget who we are and whose we are, God reminds and re-memembers us. Holy memory is ours through the grace of God; may it strengthen us today, for the sake of the future to which God calls us.

### **Share aloud or reflect:**

9. How might remembering "who we are and whose we are" transform daily life and faith for you and for your congregation?
  
10. How might God's "re-memembering" shape the future? 🌿