

# COVENANT WORD

## *If the Stories Fade, then ...*

Deut. 11:18-21; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

A message by  
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Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.  
Sarah Shelton



My childhood home had three rooms where most of our living together took place: the kitchen, the dining room and the living room. Gathering in the living room after supper, we would start a fire and then the storytelling began.

Tell about the time you sold Christmas trees in Kentucky.

Tell about the man who scared you in the sanctuary by saying from the shadows, "I'm a-gonna get you!"

Tell about the Christmas that Mary Helen got a doll that didn't cry or take a bottle or wet her diaper.

Tell about picking up hitch hikers on a snowy Christmas Eve and how they left a ham and freshly rolled cigars in the trunk of your car.

On and on our parents would share until our eyes were heavy and our ears worn out from listening.

I have told you these same stories through the years. I've told them not only because there some connection with that day's lectionary reading, but because of the same reasons that the writer of Deuteronomy instructs us: "The words in our hearts and souls must be taught to our children, while sitting in the house or walking by the way, when we lie down and when we rise up." We do it because if the stories fade, then they are lost forever. Most of our funerals and wakes, memorials and vigils occur so that the stories of life – individually and collectively – may be shared.

It is this better part of wisdom that the Jewish communities even today tell their children about how they escaped from Egypt, how the great sea parted

for the Israelites' crossing, and then overflowed on those who pursued; and how the Lord led them through the wilderness to arrive in the Promised Land.

The story of Lazarus is another story told with such frequency that the writer of John's gospel thought to include it. He's the only one who did, so I am tempted to say that we are the ones to help keep this story alive. It is told at nearly every funeral service I attend or officiate. It is one of those stories we carry with us in our hearts and souls so that when we weep in grief over devastating loss or betrayal, we know we are not alone, because here, in John's story, Jesus weeps too.

+ Jesus weeps for his friend Lazarus. Certainly, Jesus is sad, but by bringing Lazarus back to

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life, Jesus is asking Lazarus to give up those streets of gold for the reality that he will have to die again someday.

+ Jesus weeps for the personal disappointment that Mary and Martha's confrontations bring.

+ He weeps over the critical nature of the Pharisees and chief priests and how they will use this resurrection miracle of new life as fodder for their murderous plans that bring death.

+ He weeps for himself. With no Garden of Gethsemane crisis in John's gospel, and with no scream of desertion from the cross, it is at

Lazarus' tomb that the reality of his own death becomes real for Jesus. Lazarus will come out and Jesus will take his place. John's story about Lazarus is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead. Jesus does for his friend what only God will do for him. It is a story of assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death. So strong that it can call us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Can these bones live?" *Christian Century*, March 13, 1996)

We have a God who creates life in the midst of grief, who creates love in the midst of loss, who creates faith in the midst of despair. God resurrects us from our big and little deaths showing us by his own example that Jesus is "the resurrection and the life" for anyone who will believe that it just might be true.

Jesus tries to explain this to the disciples on that night when they gather around the table for Passover. He takes common, everyday elements that they will see at every meal from that time forward. Jesus infuses those elements with meaning that can be easily remembered; so that his story and their story together is told over and over again. It is how we remember that he took the bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread and shared the bread with his friends. And then, in like form, he took the cup, blessed the cup and shared the cup with his friends.

***"We shall all pass through this earth; only the stones remain."***

He does these things so that we will remember the story. I don't want to imagine what might happen if this story fades from our hearts and souls, do you?

Lloyd and I spent our week away doing some in-state tourism. We visited Helen Keller's birthplace, Ivy Green, in Tuscumbia. In Muscle Shoals, we toured the recording studios that accommodated the likes of Aretha Franklin, Paul Simon, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and even our own John McElroy. It was only because friends had encouraged us to drive over the Tennessee River to the edge of The Natchez Trace

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that we went in search of a stone wall. I confess that I rolled my eyes at the prospects of this site. So maybe you can imagine my surprise to find a wall of height from 4 to 6 feet high and as much as 6 feet across. It is the largest wall in the United States that does not have any mortar to hold it together. What remains in Alabama is over a mile long. The builder was Tom Hendrix, a relative of our Rosalind McClanahan, and he says the wall's construction wore out three trucks, 22 wheelbarrows, 3800 pairs of gloves and three dogs! Hendrix was known to say "I'm a firm believer that you cannot see America from I-65. You've got to get off the beaten path to see what crazy people like me are doing."

Hendrix once met a Yuchi Indian woman who told him, "We shall all pass through this earth; only the stones remain." So Hendrix built the wall to honor the memory of his great great grandmother. The memorial wall tells the story of Tel-ah-nay.

Tel-ah-nay, a Yuchi Indian, lived on the banks of the Tennessee River with her family. When she was born, her grandmother took the umbilical cord and placed it in the river so that the river became Tel-ah-nay's sister. That connection, along with dreams of her grandmother, inspired Tel-ah-nay to walk back home to Alabama after being relocated to The Camp of All Nations in Oklahoma. We know this as The Trail of Tears. It took her five years to walk back to Tuscumbia. Tel-ah-nay said that no rivers in Oklahoma would sing to her, and so she returned to the Tennessee River where she could hear the woman of the river sing. To honor her memory, Hendrix took the plain and ordinary and gave them new significance as he built the stone wall of remembrance.

Lloyd and I were struck by the small altars left along the way by visitors – strings of beads, small rocks stacked into cairns, bits of jewelry, jade from China, geodes from New Zealand – little mementos left behind to keep the stories from visitors' hearts alive as they paid their respects to Tel-ah-nay. Around one corner, we found a wall of stone faces. Naturally made from the passing of time, all the stones portray human faces. An Indian spiritualist who visits says that the wall of faces represents seven generations of Hendrix' ancestors.

Frederick Buechner (*Whistling in the Dark*, "Remember") says:

When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years or miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost...but if you forget me, part of who I am will be gone.

So just like the wall for Tel-ah-nay, there is a wall of remembrance at the back of the sanctuary. Before or after receiving communion, visit the wall to remember, to be mindful of a saint who has gone before, a saint who is currently present in your life or a saint who is in the making. Use the markers to write their names on the wall or draw a symbol to represent the individual. There are also candles in the foyer that you may light to honor the memory of someone's story. Be sure, however, that you come to this table to remember Christ and to honor this Savior who not only knows us now, but will remember and claim us when we arrive in his Kingdom.