

Once Upon a Time
Romans 15:4-6, 13
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Once upon a time there was a four year old kid with long, wavy, auburn-colored hair who liked to roam and ramble upon his grandparents' farm. He wasn't allowed to climb over or crawl under the fence and enter the barnyard or pastures at four years old, but the yard itself was filled with magical delights. Plus he could use the barnyard fence to climb up into the tree that overlooked the barnyard. Many hour of imaginative play were spent hanging out in that tree.

The kid was me. Since Sebastian has been born I've experienced a lot of nostalgia. As I've contemplated what he will remember from his childhood, my own memories have been vivid. Much of my nostalgia has been focused on my childhood play on the farm of my Jones grandparents. Swinging on the tire dangling from the catalpa tree. Creating new worlds in the gravel of the driveway. Watching calves being born. And, when I was older, roaming over the pastures and exploring the dark recesses of the barns.

These early childhood experiences of play helped to shape my imagination in lasting ways. And it is those memories which bring me comfort and joy and fill me with wonder.

What are your memories?

You each have a piece of paper with a glittery hanger. We want you to write down some memory that is important and special to you. Maybe just a word or name or you can take the time to write a story. At the close of the service you can bring your memory and hang it on one of the three trees behind me. These will be our Memory Trees. You can guess that next week that tree will be our Dreaming Tree.

Memories. All week as I prepared worship and a sermon on this theme I kept singing "Memories light the corners of my mind. Misty water-colored memories of the way we were." (I'm definitely no Babs.)

In the late summer I read an essay by the scholar Harvey Cox entitled "The Need to Recover Celebration." In the essay he argues that "Our celebrative and imaginative faculties have atrophied," and that we need to recover our ability to fantasize, to dream, to dance for joy. He wrote, "Celebration requires a set of common memories and collective hopes."

Discussion of this essay by the church staff led to our Advent theme this year, "Remember and Dream." Today we focus on remembering, for our memories are the source of our dreams, our hopes.

But remembering has two sides, right?

We are filled with beautiful memories, especially during the holidays. Many of us experience sentimental longings for what Christmas was like in our childhood. The homemade candies, Grandma's cooking, playing with siblings and cousins, those special gifts, building snowpeople, all the magical experiences of childhood.

But the other side of memory are the things that we sometimes try to forget. Forgetting and remembering go hand-in-hand.

In October Jim Harmon and I were driving to visit LaRue Gilman's family in order to plan her funeral service and along the way we heard an interview with the novelist Rabih Alameddine on *All Things Considered*. He was discussing his new novel *The Angel of History* which is about remembering and forgetting. Alameddine said, "I actually feel that people don't remember anything anymore. I mean it's both lovely and horrifying that we live in a culture that encourages us to forget, to keep forgetting and moving, keep forgetting and moving on." Alameddine believes that we need to remember, even those things we'd like to forget.

I picked the poem "Native Memory," read earlier, as a reminder that even in the midst of catastrophe, memory is vital for our story to continue on. After the death of Michael's mother recently, the task becomes even more important for Michael and me to tell Sebastian the stories of his Lola so that he might inherit her gifts and virtues.

Memories are turned into stories and thus they help to create our sense of identity. They bring coherence to our wild experiences and shape who we understand ourselves to be.

At the close of his letter to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul reminds them that the old stories exist for their instruction and encouragement, so that they might have hope. Paul is telling us that we need to remember if we are going to be able to dream.

Here's Harvey Cox again, "The religious person is one who grasps his or her own life within a larger historical and cosmic setting. One sees the self as part of a greater whole, a longer story in which one plays a part." Cox believes that the rituals of worship and celebration invite us into the story. He writes, "they give us a past and a future." Which is why we bother with all this holiday stuff.

As Christians we are part of an epic story, rooted in the ancient past, in the journeys of Abraham and Sarah and the Exodus of the slaves from Egypt. Our story includes prophets and priests, poets and dancers, singers and painters, activists and statesmen, pilgrims and pioneers. We are part of God's on-going, cosmic story. Remembering ourselves as part of God's story becomes a source of empowerment. Through our memories, we are empowered to dream, to hope, to celebrate.

And so today I invite you to remember your story. It begins:

"Once upon a time . . ."