

The Art of Remembrance
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A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, August 9, 2026, by the Rev. Pepper Swanson
Scriptures: [Ezra 3:10-13](#) and [Psalm 42:1-5](#)
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I was struck by the role of memory in both of today's Scripture readings.

In our reading from Psalm 42, which we believe was written when the Israelites were exiled in Babylon, the psalmist longs to be reunited with God at the Temple in Jerusalem. In his longing, he remembers how he used to walk with a large procession of people to the Temple and how they shouted with joy and thanksgiving as they entered. It is a happy memory of a better time when he rejoiced to worship.

His memory evoked memories of my own of the many times my fellow clergy and I would process down the church aisle, walking behind the choir in their robes, entering the sanctuary to celebrate both ordinary and extraordinary worship services.

And, somewhat oddly, his memory also reminded me of walking the ramps of the Oakland Coliseum after our now-departed A's had won some spectacular and late-ending game. Happy fans, crowded together, jostling one another in good spirits.

In our reading from Ezra 3, which recounts a dedication ceremony for the new foundation for the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the First Temple having been destroyed. The participants include returnees from the Exile, among them elders who had worshipped at the First Temple. After they worship and sing, the new foundation is laid, followed by shouts of joy...and weeping. The Scripture says the elders weep so loudly that people could not distinguish between the sound of joy and the sound of weeping.

Why the weeping? Well, memories. The elders weep because they remember the old Temple, its grandeur, its destruction, how it compares now to this feeble new beginning, or because they thought this day would never come. The elders weep because they remember the pain of utter destruction even as they rejoice in reconstruction.

I was reminded by this story of the fire that destroyed my childhood home when I was twelve and the complex emotions I experienced seeing it torn down and a new and very different house built in its place.

It also reminded me of the Oakland Firestorm in 1991 that ravaged Rockridge where I lived at the time. To see the lovely houses that lined the windy roads above my apartment reduced to ashy skeletons and then to see new houses emerge slowly but surely as they were rebuilt is unforgettable. I can't bring myself to get rid of these

newspapers which have all the details but in truth what is more evocative is my memory of how strangely hot the wind blew that day from the East, how the traffic on Highway 24 stopped, and how the black smoke cloud grew and grew all day.

So, memory plays an important role in both of today's Scriptures. In both, it cracks open what's happening and taps into an emotional core, enabling the individuals involved to acknowledge their pain or happiness.

As someone relatively new to being older, I am somewhat surprised by how many memories my brain is capable of generating each day, triggered by this or that or by just laying in bed a little longer than I should. I have memories of church but also of childhood, of my most tender and troubling moments with family, my most absurd mistakes, and the times I wish I could have said something but didn't. Modern psychology lays out many options for sorting through our memories, especially as we age, but I thought it might be useful to take a brief look at the role of memory in the Bible.

First of all, the Bible provides rich examples of how individuals use their personal memories to reconcile a complicated past, including both their own terrible mistakes and their mistreatment at the hands of others.

Most of you probably know the story of Jacob and how he deceived his own father to secure a blessing that belonged to his twin, how he was tricked into serving fourteen years of labor for his uncle, and how his oldest sons sold his favorite son Joseph into slavery in a distant land. In short, Jacob had a life of trickery and betrayal. At the end of his life, however, Jacob synthesizes his memories into a single story of God's presence and protection, the Shepherd of all his days. Jacob reconciles his past into a testimony of providence and blessing, rather than bitterness.

In addition, we find many places in Scripture, particularly in the Psalms, where individuals are fighting fear, anxiety, and sadness. In Psalm 71, for example, an aging psalmist has great fear of his enemies but uses his memories of how God has saved and protected him throughout his life to fight this fear and anxiety, saying "You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again."¹

Third, we find in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Scripture, that memory is often a tool for reminding the young of their spiritual history, grounding their present in the traditions of their faith, and laying out their future responsibilities.

Almost the entire Book of Deuteronomy is Moses using his memories of the Israelites' time in the wilderness to remind the younger generation how God saved and provided for them, how important it is to build these memories of hardship into their daily lives,

¹ Psalm 71 (NRSV)

and how critical it is that they do not repeat either how they were treated harshly or the times they abandon God or their faith.

Similarly in the Book of Joshua, elderly Joshua uses his memory to proclaim his family's future commitment to God, saying "...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."² To which, the younger generation, most of whom had only Joshua's memory of these past events, proclaimed that they also would not forsake the God who brought them out of slavery and protected them.

So in the Hebrew Scripture, memories used as a tool to reconcile a complicated life, to fight fear and anxiety. and to teach the young about their faith and their God.

In the New Testament, the most powerful example of the use of memory flows from the Last Supper — a Passover meal — at which (both then and now) the focus is on remembering God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. To this ritualized memory, Jesus adds his own ritual of offering the bread and cup. By the time the Gospels are recorded in 70 to 90 CE, the memory of the night Jesus offered the bread and cup was intrinsic to and inseparable from the memory of his death and resurrection.

So much so, that in Luke's story of the Road to Emmaus, recorded almost a century after Jesus' death, two men walk and talk with Jesus, recounting the events of the Resurrection, but do not recognize him until he breaks the bread for them.

All of these elements — Passover, the Last Supper, Emmaus — are examples of what the ancient Greeks called *anamnesis* (an um nee suhs) or what we might call the art of remembrance. For the ancient Greeks, anamnesis went beyond mental recollection to a more active recall that makes the memory dynamically alive and immediately present to us. Like Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, memory helps us get home and memory proves who we are to ourselves and to others.

Nowadays, however, we have all absorbed some understandings of memory that are quite different from the Bible or classical Greek. For these differences, we can give thanks to what philosophers call Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Meta-Modernism (the last being unrelated to Mark Zuckerberg's Meta company).

Modernism, which began in the late 18th and 19th centuries brought memory inward and made it both more mysterious, private, and something to interpret personally. Modernism treats memory as the key to understanding the human subconscious and Freud, in particular, argued that memory is buried within us and leaks into our present behavior, triggered unwittingly by small acts and events. The classic example of this may be in Orson Welles' epic movie *Citizen Kane*, in which "Rosebud" uttered on a deathbed is revealed to be a sled that represents Kane's happy childhood.

² Joshua 24:15b (NRSV)

In Postmodernism, which emerged after World War II, memory has become less psychological and much more subjective, unstable, and political. Postmodernism argues that we actively invent our memories to serve the needs and anxieties of the present. Post-modern people are more likely to adopt fluid ways of treating memories, sometimes rewriting memories to reframe events, to fake nostalgia, or to create a fiction better than the actual truth.

If you wonder what drives the Trump Administration's attempts to rewrite American's memory, history and culture — erasing slavery, spinning US history into absolute greatness, and re-envisioning our democratic values — look no further than Postmodernism's treatment of memory as just a rhetorical construct cynically serving the constructor's political purposes.

As dire as that sounds, there are signs that our culture is moving beyond Postmodernism to what is being called Meta-modernism.

Meta-modernism is a cultural shift in which we both embrace that our memories are shaped by ourselves, as well as others, the media and politics and we choose to believe that memory can be meaningful, restorative, and soulful.³

The Meta-modern turn or oscillation from cynicism and manipulation to purposely finding connection, love, and emotional depth is cropping up in film and literature. Take for example, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, where the main character Evelyn survives a Post-Modern fragmentation of memory and time, but is able to anchor herself in memories of love.⁴ Or the animated movie *Inside Out* from 2015, which concludes that 15-year old Riley's core memories cannot be purely happy and that her human growth requires memory to be complex, rather than curated.⁵

Meta-modernism doesn't take us full circle back to our Biblical teachings but it is certainly closer than either the Freudian subconscious of Modernism or the meaninglessness of Postmodernism. And that's okay because one of the most fundamental Christian teachings will always be that we, with our memories good and bad, are in the world, but not of it.

As Paul said in Romans 12, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind..."⁶ The Bible teaches us that our memories have meaning and that meaning is rooted in our relationship to God and to one another.

³ Vincent, Benjamin. "Goodbye Postmodernism, Hello Metamodernism." Christianity Today, www.christianitytoday.com, May 6, 2024, accessed August 10, 2026.

⁴ Johnson, Lina. "Rise of metamodern films," *The Daily Targum*, www.dailytargum.com, October 7, 2024, accessed August 10, 2026.

⁵ Hernandez, Ernio. "How Inside Out is Really Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind for Kids," Medium, www.medium.com, August 26, 2015, accessed August 10, 2026.

⁶ Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

So, friends, let us remember that like the Psalmist or the writer of Ezra, memory is a door to our emotional core and our great longing for our lives to reflect our connection to God. Let us remember that like Jacob, memory can help us reconcile a difficult past and remember the presence of God with us. Let us remember that like Moses and Joshua, our memories are a tool for teaching and reminding others of our shared experience and the tenets of our faith. Lastly, let us remember that each Sunday at the Communion Table, we participate not in a mere recollection but in an active, dynamic, & living remembrance of Jesus, his faith, and the gift of his life. Amen.