DATE: October 25th, 2026
TEXT: Joshua 24:2-10
THEME: How we remember shapes how we interpret our present circumstances, how we live into our values and our purpose.
SUBJECT: Remembering
TITLE: Tending to the Soul by Telling Our Story

Main question: What Is Our Story?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

The word "remember" appears around 1,200 times in the Bible. The exact number depends on the version you read. It's not the most common word in scripture, however. Beyond conjunctions, articles and particles, the most frequent word in the Bible is _____. (7,700+ times, NIV). In scripture, "God" is next (4,000+). "Remember" appears in NIV scripture more than the words *earth, sons, Jerusalem, Moses, Spirit, Jesus*. Clearly, there is an emphasis on "remembering" in scripture. Recalling past events, promises, stories and teaching is a high priority in our faith tradition that spans more than 3,000 years. Susan Beaumont, whose work I've been drawing on for this sermon series on tending to the soul, says, "How we remember shapes how we interpret our present circumstances, how we live into our values, how we make decisions, and how we claim our purpose. Memory work is soul-tending work" (Beaumont S., How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going, Rowman and Littlefield (2019), p.96). I would simply add that memory work is soul-tending work both for individuals and for organizations.

Because our faith story is written down, one might think that it can't change. You can't change history. You can't go back in time and make things different. Or can you?

Actually, we travel back in time all the time. Not in physical form, but in our memory and in the way we interpret history. Perhaps we alter history a little whenever we travel back in time, shaping who we are by forming, re-forming and reinforcing our relationships to events and people in the past in our minds. Many people are doing that right now in relation to U.S. history. As I was growing up, I learned a certain history and perhaps many of you learned a similar one - one that highlighted the struggle of the first European settlers to this continent - Puritans fleeing persecution in England who were befriended by "Native Americans." (I wasn't even told the name of those Indigenous People, nor the fact that they had arrived thousands of years before the Pilgrims). Beyond the Puritans, I learned about Quakers who arrived in the late 1600s and even about a Presbyterian clergyperson (John Witherspoon) who signed the Declaration of Independence. I was told about the founding fathers and about the resistance of patriots who fought bravely against Britain. I didn't learn about indigenous people (nothing substantive) or about the impact of racism on our laws, our rise as a nation, our economy and our divided identities. I didn't know anything about queer history and there was little attention given to the effects that humans are having on the environment. There are many who are still telling the same story about the U.S. that I was told nearly 50 years ago in high school and there are many who wonder why the story needs to be told differently. These different ways of understanding our nation's growth have produced very different ways of interpreting our present circumstances, different sets of values, different senses of purpose, different visions for the future.

What has actually happened in the past may be immaterial. How we remember the past is probably more important. Consider the story that Joshua told in chapter 24 of that

book as he gathered all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem. He told of how their ancestors started out beyond the Euphrates River, worshipping other gods, and that YHWH led the patriarch Abra(ha)m into Canaan. Abraham had a son, Isaac, and Isaac had a son, Jacob. Jacob's line settled in Egypt. Then Moses brought them out. As he did, the people came to a great sea and they thought they would be destroyed by the pursuing Egyptians. But God delivered the people and instead destroyed the Egyptian army. Then the Israelites lived in the desert for a long time, ultimately conquering the Amorites and settling in their land. The Israelites also conquered the Moabites. The king of Moab sent a prophet, Balaam, to curse Israel, but God delivered them from the hand of the king of Moab. And the story continues. What's left out? [pause] If all you remembered of Israel's history came from this re-telling, you wouldn't know the Hebrew people were once enslaved in Egypt. And, in a way, the key memory in the Jewish faith today - the exodus from Egypt, which IS included briefly - has no meaning without mention of the suffering that came from enslavement in Egypt and God's promise of redemption. This fact makes me think that this is a story told early on in the history of the Jewish people, created before later stories made a much bigger deal about the exodus and about slavery and the theological concept of redemption. The collective memory of the Hebrew people, in short, may have changed and may have been reinterpreted over time. Here's something else about the story in Joshua 24: It builds up an identity around conquest, not suffering and redemption. Perhaps it changed because the original story didn't have enough identity "glue" to hold people together as they were being conquered by other nations like the Assyrians and Babylonians over hundreds of years. A story about conquering others when they were being conquered, a story without suffering and

redemption, didn't offer hope and purpose anymore to people who were suffering and who needed redemption. It only offered heartbreak to people who felt oppressed as the story spoke of a time when they were supposedly great. Perhaps every enduring story is one that acknowledges the trials and difficulties of living while also acknowledging the hope of redemption because difficulty and suffering is a universal human experience and all people in every generation need hope in the midst of it. Leave out suffering and redemption in a people's history, and the story inevitably fades away. Maybe that's why the traditional story of U.S. history is falling apart now. It's a story about conquest and about some hardship by some early European settlers. But it doesn't really acknowledge corporate suffering - certainly not by Indigenous people or Africans or women or LGBTQ+ - and it doesn't mention anything about individual and national redemption. New stories about our past are starting to include these, however, and I think that will ultimately be a more hopeful story.

Stories matter. How we tell them, what we include and what we leave out shapes our present circumstances and our responses to them. Stories are informed by our values and decisions, our influences and our sense of purpose and, in turn, form other values, decisions, and sense of purpose.

Susan Beaumont says, "When we are between an ending and a new beginning, when we are neither here or there, when we aren't certain what to do next, we turn to our memories and stories to make meaning of our experience" (Beaumont, How to Lead, p. 98). This is good and appropriate. But there's a caveat: sometimes we don't remember rightly. We tell stories that include facts, but they may not be accurate, or we may leave out embarrassing details, or we may fail to make important connections, or we may

streamline a story so that it's simple and easy to understand for the masses. What's left out, however, is just as important as what gets told. When you tell the story of Southminster, is there anything you avoid talking about? Why? Is it not a happy memory? Does it put this church in less than a good light? Is it a painful memory that might not be easy to remember? Whether we include these memories in stories about our history or not, however, the identity of this congregation has been shaped by them and I think it's important to acknowledge the whole story - even the messy parts - so that we can understand truly who we are and can authentically claim our identity and our way forward.

Susan Beaumont has worked with hundreds of congregations across the continent. She once asked a congregation that was preparing for pastoral transition to tell their story of previous pastoral transitions in hope of identifying values and lessons learned. The members told of a "successful" pastoral transition that had occurred twenty years earlier. Leaders told of an easy transition, often ending their accounts with, "We've had only five senior ministers in our eighty-year history. We choose our pastors to last."

After interviewing the 20-year senior pastor who was hired at the end of that transition, a competing narrative surfaced. He spoke of a prolonged period of distrust during which he had to prove himself time and time again. The pastor described the first seven years of his ministry at that church as "very difficult"; he was there for seven years before he was allowed to pick up the leadership mantle and shape the direction of the congregation. The downside of the long-tenured pastorates in that congregation was an organizational culture that was very resistant to change, even though the common narrative was that transitions were relatively seamless (Beaumont, How To Lead, p. 101).

In their book Know Your Story and Lead With It, Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones talk about thin and thick narratives. A *thin narrative* is one that contains little detail, reflects a narrow viewpoint and has few or no competing perspectives. A *thick narrative* is one that does contain detail. It reveals differing viewpoints and tension between values. During liminal times, when anxiety is higher, organizations tend toward thin narratives in order to reduce anxiety and calm people down. If these stories remain unexamined over time, the storyline remains thin and the true, authentic soul of the organization gradually diminishes and may eventually stop speaking of people's identity, their purpose and their values.

That's why it's important for us to tell our story rightly. Over time, that story will probably need revision as our circumstances change and as our understanding of our relationship to past events evolves. And that's OK. That's healthy. Yet even as we travel back in time - forming, re-forming and reinforcing our relationships to events of the past in our minds, leaving some things out and emphasizing other things, and each time we do, our focus changes a little - God's memory is constant and God's focus never changes. God knows the messiness of our life stories and knows that we get it wrong a lot. And still God, in God's perfect memory and love, holds us and all things in her story forever. Nothing is left out; everything is included, so that we can sing with confidence the words of hymn 703 …