

## All Memory is Prelude

May 30, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31*

Let me begin with a confession. I had a hard time orienting myself for this sermon and choosing where to focus. I felt like a pinball ricocheting back and forth between the variety of occasions we are all trying to hold and honor this weekend, each with a decidedly different energy. Yesterday's long-awaited May 29 milestone is just the start! Many are feeling ready and able to begin living life more fully and freely! Alleluia! It's wonderful, and weird, all at the same time, at least it felt that way to me. After forgetting to remember my mask for so long, I'm now trying to remember to forget about it in most places. I'm still catching up. Meanwhile, tomorrow is Memorial Day, an important time for us all to pause, remember and honor those who have served this county and who have lost their lives in war. After these past 14 months, we may feel an almost instinctively added desire to honor and remember the millions who have lost their lives battling Covid. At the same time, our hearts have been heavy for so long so let's not forget tomorrow, rain or shine, is also the unofficial start to summer, and a summer that might actually feel like summer. Bonus! We can all use that ceremonial kickoff to more time outside, more decidedly offline time with family and friends, more time for backyard or neighborhood BBQ's! Bring it on! And yet tomorrow is also the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre when white mobs killed hundreds of black people while decimating thousands of black-owned homes and businesses on what was then called Black Wall Street. And all this just a few days after the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder. We've got so many different things to honor and hold in this moment, bumping us in every direction. Yet even our liturgical calendar, often a go-to for holding us in hard times and good, even that leaves us hanging this Sunday. Some traditions celebrate today as Trinity Sunday. Others know it as the beginning of the nearly six months between Pentecost and Advent that the church calls "Ordinary Time." Give me a break! I would love to try to land us in some ordinary time right about now, but we aren't there yet. Far from it.

Before we turn to what I trust will be some grounding wisdom of today's scriptures, allow me to share a fascinating story I came across this week. In fact, it's sort of a pre-history of Memorial Day, and it helped to reorient me to at least a part of what this weekend is about. Some of you may remember when Memorial Day was made an official federal holiday in 1971. Others of you may remember a time when it was called Decoration Day, a tradition which began to take hold in 1868 in various local communities, Northern and Southern, that would decorate the graves of war dead with flower. But one of, if not the, first celebration of Memorial Day happened three years earlier, in 1865 in Charleston, North Carolina! In 1996, the Yale historian David Blight was researching a book about something else civil war related right here at Harvard's Houghton Library when someone happened to pull from their vast archive two boxes of papers and clippings labeled "The First Decoration Day." He wasn't even looking for what he was about to find! Turns out that after the Union siege and confederate surrender of Charleston, in the Spring of 1865, white residents had fled the city while thousands of blacks Charlestonians remained. They tried various ways of commemorating and making meaning of the war's end yet by far largest of these events took place on the Washington Horse Race and Jockey track owned by former slavers. In the last year of the war, the Confederates had converted the track into an outdoor prison. At least 257 Union soldiers died there and were hastily buried in a mass grave behind the grandstand. In the days after the surrender, Blight discovered records that a few dozen black workers took it upon themselves to

re-bury the Union dead properly, each with their own grave. They built a fence around the cemetery along with an archway over the entrance on which they inscribed the words, “Martyrs of the Race Course.” They then joined with over 10,000 black Charlestonians and white folks too, clergy, missionaries and teachers, who held a huge parade on and around the racetrack and cemetery. Blight is careful to note the symbolic power of former enslaved persons and Union soldiers celebrating emancipation and victory at a setting originally designed to display Southern “wealth, leisure and influence.” Now check out these further details that Blight just happened upon that day at Houghton. He writes: “At 9 a.m. on May 1, the procession stepped off led by three thousand black schoolchildren carrying arm loads of roses and singing “John Brown’s Body.” The children were followed by several hundred black women with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses. Then came black men marching in cadence, followed by contingents of Union infantry and other black and white citizens. As many as possible gathered in the cemetery enclosure; a children’s choir sang “We’ll Rally around the Flag,” the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and several spirituals before several black ministers read from scripture.” Blight goes on to note: “Following the solemn dedication the crowd dispersed into the infield and did what many of us do on Memorial Day: they enjoyed picnics, listened to speeches, and watched soldiers drill. Among the full brigade of Union infantry participating was the famous 54th Massachusetts and the 34th and 104th U.S. Colored Troops, who performed a special double-columned march around the gravesite. The war was over, and Decoration Day had been founded by African Americans in a ritual of remembrance and consecration!” Amazing right? Talk about a celebration of pride, valor and freedom! And yet why are we just hearing about this now, and how might this origin story have shaped differently how and why celebrate these three days?! Blight inserts some powerful reflective notes in his telling. He writes: “War kills people and destroys human creation; but as though mocking war’s devastation, flowers inevitably bloom through its ruins.” And he ends with this: “Some stories endure, some disappear, some are rediscovered in dusty archives, the pages of old newspapers, and in oral history. All such stories as the First [Memorial] Day are but prelude to future reckonings. All memory is prelude.”<sup>1</sup>

Having said all that, let’s turn to our scripture briefly. In the midst of all we are holding this week, enter the biblical wisdom of Proverbs 8: “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?” How and where is God’s wisdom calling out to us today? Like those cool breezes on those scorches this past week, she may be showing up with just the pause, the invitation to reflection and refreshment we need! You see, in Proverbs, we learn that God’s wisdom, personified in feminine form, credentials herself as a full partner with God the Creator. She recalls how she was right there beside God, part of the decoration of the universe, on the very first day and even before that! She remembers and powerfully self-affirms who she is! She was right there beside God like a master worker; yet also as if like a child at her parent’s feet, the universe her playground amidst an atmosphere of mutual delight. Scripture tells us “She was daily God’s delight, rejoicing before God always, together they rejoiced in God’s inhabited world and delighted in the human race. As Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has said, “wisdom “is a beneficent power in whom God delights and by whom God creates; her constant effort is to lure human beings into life.” Talk about memory as a prelude! How is this wise child of God, this playful Spirit of deep and grounded wisdom old as life, calling to us and raising her voice to us now? What if it’s simply to tell us this. God’s Wisdom remembers! She remembers and delights in from whence she came! She remembers the wonder and beauty of creation. She remembers how it all began, and as other verses make clear, she remembers everything since! She remembers every detail - from the very first bits of soil, to when God made the skies, and assigned limits of the sea. She remembers ‘when

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/the-first-decoration-day/>

mountains had been shaped.’ I love Robert Alter’s translation of this verse 25 - “when God anchored the mountains” and his footnote that Hebrew verb here denotes a setting of something in its sockets! Imagine remembering when the mountains were set in their sockets? If only!

Only God in her wisdom remembers, yet too often in our human limitations, in our deep human folly and selfishness and denial and disregard of our Maker, we forget! And how much truer can this be of nations! No wonder it has taken this country so long to reckon with its past. No wonder most of us have never heard the black history of Memorial Day or are only just now learning the vast intergenerational consequences of what happened 100 years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It’s because those with power to shape whose history is told...and what history is told...and how history is told... have for generations suffered from a case of willful amnesia! And we still see it playing out! We saw it play out this very week on the Senate floor! Insurrection? What insurrection? Quick, someone go hide that footage deep in the stacks of the Library of Congress! We don’t need to investigate that, not if hurts our cause, not if destroys our power! Black Wall Street? What Black Wall Street? As if having their own center for commerce and wealth accumulation in 1921 could have made a difference for generations of descendants of black folks in Tulsa. Reparations for the descendants and the three living survivors, one of whom is basically homeless? What reparations? It was so long ago, who can really say who is owed what! Yet the sting of those riots continues to be felt in the daily lives and economic hardship of that community today. But \$30 million was raised and contributed for building a museum to remember and tell the truth of the story? Good on you, Tulsa, that’s a start! But how much of that is to repair the white guilt for forgetting for so long and what about the real cost of reparations to the survivors and their descendants? Join us next week at our 9:30 hour on reparations here in this community and how we are learning how to wrestle with these same questions!

All memory of such stories is prelude to future reckonings! May these memories continue to be anchored in truth-telling and justice, like the earth’s great mountains in their sockets! My we continue to believe that even as the powers and principalities continue in their, and our folly of willful amnesia, that God’s wisdom remembers! She remembers it all, from the very beginnings of creation itself. Her spirit flows through and grounds and connects the ancestors and elder and never forgets the ways of divine delight in all God’s children. She remembers that even amidst gut-wrenching pain and grief, the very groaning labors pain of creation as Paul once wrote, there is a grief and pain that makes for joy, that turns prisons into parades of freedom, and burned down inner cities into playgrounds and picnics of promise and delight!

Before we “go back” to normal in the weeks ahead, before we resume our willful amnesia of what this pandemic time has taught us, what is God’s wisdom calling us to remember right now! What are the memories will be preludes for reckoning? How can wisdom’s deep memory of creations goodness and God’s delight in all of our humanity be a prelude for our future collective liberation and joy? Come Holy Spirit! Come Root of Life and Source of Love! Come Holy Wisdom! Come to us now, in this weekend where we have so much to hold. Forgive our too often forgetful ways. Teach us the wisdom of our origin stories, show us the ways of our wise elders and ancestors and the wonders of our children. Restore our memory of you God and give us a soaring prelude for brighter days ahead! Amen.