

## Challenging History and Finding Hope

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Value: We will welcome the stranger, including immigrants and refugees, as our Scriptures instruct. We will explore how to support their causes and advocate for justice, remembering that many of us are the children of immigrants and refugees.

Did you know that if you opened your Bible to the middle, you would end up in the psalms? Have you ever tried that? Let's see how it goes...

I love this little factoid about the Bible. The very center of the Bible consists of poetry that ranges from joy to lament to praise to despair to encouragement to repentance to strength to depression and so much more. These 150 poems speak to the vast range of human emotions and experience. One way I understand the psalms is that they are records of how ancient people cried out to God and how they made sense of the complexity of their humanity.

Psalms 106 is one such psalm. It is considered one of the historical psalms because it retells part of the history of God's people. Listen to this excerpt of this retelling of history:

106:1 Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

106:2 Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all his praise?

106:3 Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

106:4 Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them;

106:5 that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage.

106:6 Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

106:19 They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image.

106:20 They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.

106:21 They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,

106:22 wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

106:23 Therefore he said he would destroy them-- had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Psalms 106 goes on to rehash more of the Israelites' history, how they listened to and obeyed God...and then, as all humans do, they strayed and fell away...and then came back once more to honor God. This psalm is a very human psalm, illustrating the tension of living in a complex world and navigating the space between history and memory.

History and memory. They are related but very different. Many of us know this practically, as I bet we can conjure up memories that we know are ours, things that we really remember happening. There are facts that we have experienced firsthand. But then there are the stories that we don't personally remember, but it feels like we do because the stories have been told to us so many times.

Memories, different kinds of memories are stories we tell ourselves. But history is also a story we tell ourselves. Stories can be dangerous, particularly when enhanced by politics, economics and theology. In the USA, for example, we have lots of stories we've been handed down about the formation of this country, the values this country was established to uphold, the exceptionalism that made this country what it is now...except, that's only one way of telling it. There's also the stories of indigenous peoples who have lived on these lands for thousands of years before the people who looked like me, northern Europeans, sailed across the ocean and imposed their version of history through violence and coercion and genocide, destroying indigenous ways of life and kidnapping Africans into slavery. History is dangerous.

As you may know, this church is in the middle of a sermon series highlighting values we affirm as a congregation. These values can be found on the church website by clicking the "about us" tab on the left of the screen and scrolling down to the green "values" button. The value that we consider today is this: "We will welcome the stranger, including immigrants and refugees, as our Scriptures instruct. We will explore how to support their causes and advocate for justice, remembering that many of us are the children of immigrants and refugees." Here in this value, we are drawing on memory and history to galvanize us as we move forward in our attempts to do justice in the world, beginning with welcoming those who are different from us. History and memory have legs here, they motivate us.

But what is the shape of our motivation? What are we trying to repeat, or not repeat? What are we trying to change or make possible in the future? We must know history if we are to change the history we are living now. And we must recognize the evils that are entrenched in the history we have been taught, as well as the truth and significance in the stories that have been silenced.

Womanist theologian, scholar and current dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes tackles the relationship of memory and history in her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. In this book, Dr. Townes delves into how evil that is upheld in systems and institutions, particularly those that have exploited Black women in the US American context. She writes, "To understand evil as a cultural production is to recognize, from the outset, that the story can be told another way." (7) Here we have it: history. One story is told by victors, which in US American society look like wealthy, educated, White, cisgender men. And that story has been sold to everyone in this society as "history," knowledge about true things that have happened. And that history has informed most everything about US American society: how we understand who we are, what stories we value, what roles we play in communities, our morality, our relationships, our potential...all of these aspects of life have been impacted by the dominant story of American history.

We've seen this recently in September, as the Trump administration threatened to withhold federal funds from public schools teaching the New York Times' 1619 project, which looks at United States history including the context of slavery and racial justice in this country. In a speech decrying public education for being "wicked and racist", the President said, "Our mission is to defend the legacy of America's founding, the virtue of America's heroes and the nobility of the American character. We must clear away the twisted web of lies in our schools and classrooms and teach our children the magnificent truth about our country."<sup>1</sup>

History is a story and that story is dangerous, particularly when the voices that have long been silenced are given their due. A Time magazine article wrote, "the teaching of US History in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/18/914519531/creator-of-1619-project-on-trumps-patriotic-education>

public schools has always been political, and such concerns about whether curricula are ‘anti-American’ are par for the course in moments of turmoil.”<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 106 shows us the tension of history and memory, and so does the ongoing debate about the purpose of history education: is the goal to tell the truth, whatever that is? To convey a story in which people can find themselves? To communicate a characteristic about something that is greater than any one person’s experience? To indoctrinate?

W.E.B. DuBois wrote in *Black Reconstruction in America* in 1935, “we have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans...one is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over...The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth....If...we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art using the results of science, and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish.” (Townes, 25)

But all stories have been constructed, and they can be deconstructed. and so there are alternative stories telling of myriad experiences of Black, indigenous and people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ people, immigrants that can tell different stories that we need to hear. Dr. Townes argues that we must “Expose the ways in which a society can produce misery and suffering in relentlessly systematic and sublimely structural ways” (9). This is her definition of the *cultural production of evil*. It is in the fabric of USAmerican culture to produce and reproduce situations that rely on the suffering of “the least of these” in systematic and structural ways.

Honestly, it’s a bit stressful for many progressive Christians to talk about evil: in some ways, we (and yes I include myself in this) think that we are beyond talk of evil and sin. We consider those topics of a different milieu of Christians. But we are *not* above or beyond them, because living in the context of the USA means that we are surrounded by evil that has been systematized and encoded in institutions. Sinful actions of dehumanization are being done all around us, every day. We are not separate from these discussions, but complicit, each of us in our own ways.

That’s a lot. Imagine the psalmists including that in the litany of God’s people...the psalms do not make for light reading. But Dr. Townes encourages us this way: “while dealing with evil, it is not time to dumb down or take cover. Evil does not hide from us nor does it come in pristine forms. Like goodness, it is messy and rather confusing.” (9) And she points out that eradicating evil is a process, it requires time and intention, and is not a one-and-done-event. (5)

Dr. Townes suggests that we must break the cycles of the dominant stories that control the history in this nation, which she calls the “fantastic hegemonic imagination,” because “the histories of dominant cultures and societies have most often bolstered ruling ideologies, philosophies, or states that run roughshod over competing ideologies that do not carry commensurate abilities to exert coercion and/or force.” (15) To do this, we must practice

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<sup>2</sup> <https://time.com/5889051/history-curriculum-politics/>

*countermemory*: making courageous space to listen to each other, primarily those whose experiences are not the dominant narrative. And more than simply paying attention: decentering the privileged and deeply listening and letting the stories long held in silence change us and motivate us to change our society. Countermemory “seeks to disrupt ignorance and invisibility” by telling other stories, illuminating other histories...not “revisionist” histories or “specialized histories” but simply others. All histories are constructed, and so now the question is which histories will serve us better as we strive to build a more just future?

Remember that we were once strangers. That can be a countermemory. We ourselves or family history or people we love or chosen family may weave their stories of countermemory that motivate us. The empathy that comes from this call to remember in our church’s stated value moves us to welcome all to our doors (even our virtual doors as we worship online). Embracing this value means that we affirm that we want to contribute to make a future with more opportunity for the next generation, that we want to listen and learn from as many stories as possible, acknowledging there is space for all humans and their experiences in the kingdom of God.

Honoring the countermemories of people who live everyday on the margins of society, some of whom are near and dear to the heart of this congregation, is both challenging and hopeful work. It is challenging because there is deconstruction and reconstruction we must do, and because so much in USAmerican society is telling us to leave well enough alone. But it is also hopeful because out of those psalms of tension between history and memory springs encouragement, reminding us that we are not the first people to be on this journey. Out of the tension of history and memory comes motivation to press on in building God’s beloved community.

Rev. Dr. Townes writes in the last chapter of her book,

“To combine challenge with hope is powerful. For together they enable us to press onward when we are at the verge of giving up; to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging present. Challenge and hope make it possible for us to see the world, not only as it is, but also as it can be, so that it can move us to new places and turn us into a new people. This has the relentless and timeless force of water on the rock of the entrenched evils of the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Ultimately, the water wears the rock away through and unwillingness to alter its course....

Yes, there is something about challenge yoked with hope, when it is grounded in living for tomorrow as we live for today, that is solid enough to sustain our lives and overcome skepticism and doubt that the cultural production of evil encourages within us. But it is frightening because we know that loving and caring for others and ourselves interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us and calls us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living. Hope cannot simply be given a nod of recognition, for it demands not only a contract from us, but also a covenant and a commitment.

When we truly live in this deep-walking hope, then we must order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, rarely conventional, and protests with the prophetic fury the sins of a fantastic hegemonic imagination (and theological worldviews) that encourage us to separate our bodies from our spirits, our minds from our hearts, our beliefs from our action. Perhaps this is the most devastating impact of the cultural production of evil. It begins its work with the rending of the marvelously complex interlocking character of our humanity.

Therefore, we must yoke challenge and hope in our lives such that justice and peace mean something and are more than rhetorical ruffles and flourishes...We cannot hide from responsibility or accountability for we are never relieved of the responsibility we have to our generation and future generations to keep justice, peace, and hope alive and vibrant.” (163-164)

Beloved church, I invite you to join me in dancing in the tension between history and memory, and in weaving together challenges and hope to empower a community of warmth and inclusion, with enough sustenance for all at the table, with a place by the fire of justice for everyone.