

Remembering a Potato Famine, and More

Joshua 3:9 – 4:7

November 6, 2016

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This morning, I'd like to share a fictional story that is nevertheless true.

Once upon a time, back in 1847, Pieter and Jannie Smit, of Gelderland, a Dutch province, were what the Dutch called *dag looners*. The Smits earned a daily wage working on a potato farm. But times were tough, because for three years running, a potato blight had destroyed crops all over Europe. Poverty and hunger ruled. In Ireland, over three years, that same potato blight led to more than a million deaths by starvation.

In spite of their poverty, Pieter and Jannie did have one thing going for them. Their boss, Mr. Grooteboer, cared for his workers. That fall, another rotten potato crop in the ground, and with no work for his farmhands, Mr. Grooteboer bought passage for nearly fifty of them on a ship bound for Halifax. The Smits ended up near St. Catharines, Ontario, where they planted grapes and became Canadian pioneers.

Pieter and Jannie were thankful to Mr. Grooteboer for saving them from hunger and misery, so they decided to keep his memory alive forever. So, in the first English family Bible they purchased, Jannie Smit wrote in her shakey English, "Dis Bible is for remembering dat Mr. Grooteboer of Gelderland has gave us a nieuwe start in life."

But for all that the Smits had a hard time keeping Grooteboer's memory alive. Pieter and Jannie's children were too young to remember him personally, though they knew his name and some of the story. Pieter and Jannie's grandchildren knew that he had helped get the family to Canada, but the grandkids were not sure anymore exactly how and why he had done so. The Smit's great-grandchildren had to go to school to learn about the great European potato famine and never heard Grooteboer's name.

And that is how it came to be that within seventy years of immigrating to Canada, no Smit knew that Grooteboer had saved their ancestors from hunger and poverty by sending them to Canada. Grooteboer had been utterly forgotten.

The fact is, humans have always been a forgetful bunch. Our family memories stretch back only one, or maybe two generations beyond the oldest living members. Simply writing names in a Bible doesn't do the trick. And that presents us with a problem. How will we remember the stories about the great events that shape our lives?

Well, the Bible has a suggestion. The Bible—and from the perspective of the Bible's authors, God, so we'll just go with that—in the Bible, God insists on ceremonies called "signs and memorials" to go with the words in the Bible, to help us better remember.

Signs and memorials.

So, for example, according to the legend of the flood, when God made a covenant with Noah, he gave a rainbow as a sign that he would never destroy the earth again. And when God made promises to Abraham, promises that Abraham would be the father of a great nation that would be a blessing to all others, God added the sign of circumcision to help Abraham remember God's promise. God said, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant—the promises—between me and you." And you can be sure that whenever a Jewish child was circumcised and cried out in pain people remembered and retold the story that circumcision signs.

In the Bible, God understands that humans forget, so God decides to add signs and memorials to the story to help humans remember better. The Israelites remembered their escape from slavery in Egypt because God instituted a memorial called "the Passover Feast." In order to remember the Exodus, God said that everyone should sit down to eat the Passover lamb, once a year, and "Obey these [Passover] instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean?' you are to tell them."

Humans forget. For that reason, the Bible says God added signs and memorials to his story to help us remember. In today's scripture passage, after stopping the Jordan River so that the Israelites could miraculously pass over it on dry ground into the Promised Land—this is after the Exodus, and after passing through the Red Sea on dry ground—God made the whole nation mark the occasion by dumping twelve huge boulders into the river where they crossed. Why? Joshua says, "To serve as sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. These stones are a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

Humans forget. And like the Israelites of old, we modern Canadians are also prone to forgetting. We may have neighbours or uncles or aunts who remember the Afghanistan or Bosnian wars. We have grandparents who can remember Korea or World War II. But what about World War One's Battle of Gravenstafel where more than 6000 were wounded or killed? Or Vimy Ridge and its 10 000?

Or going back another 100 years, what about the Battles of Michelimackinac, Detroit, and Queenston Heights, where the First Nations helped pioneer Canadians turn back Americans in the War of 1812 so that we could remain a British colony? Other than Chief Tecumseh, perhaps, do we remember any of those First Nations warriors who gave their lives? Do we remember the Canadian soldiers who fought and lost their lives in less glorious wars—for example, the First Canadians who battled overseas fought Blacks and white farmers in South Africa, during the Boer war, to support the British Empire's selfish, militaristic, expansionist policies? And what about the Mounties—and the Métis—who died in the Red River Rebellion? Do we remember them, or their battles?

Family memories, like those of the Smits' escape from famine in the Netherlands, stretch back one, maybe two generations beyond the oldest living members. Just telling stories doesn't do the trick. So according to the Bible, God decided to help us remember his stories by giving us unforgettable signs, like the rocks in the river and circumcision and the Passover and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as a divine object lessons to go with the Bible, to help us remember.

And as modern Canadians, we have Remembrance Day, with trumpets and old uniforms with medals pinned on; we have cenotaphs and small white crosses and poppies. All these objects serve as national signs and memorials, to help us, and perhaps especially our children, to remember. For when you go home today, your children and grandchildren—like the Israelites before them—will ask, “what does the trumpet mean?” or “why do we wear poppies,” and “why was it quiet?” And you must tell them the story...

Anyway, a few years ago, one of Pieter and Jannie Smit's great-great-great grandchildren was sorting through the attic of the old family homestead because he had to downsize to a smaller home. In one of the trunks he found an old King James Bible printed in 1798. Going through that Bible, old Mr. Smit came upon the handwritten name of a certain Mr. Grooteboer. Beside his name there was a notation saying that he had given the Smits' a new lease on life. This puzzled old Mr. Smit, but he did not trouble himself about it. After all, it was just a name. So he threw that old Bible into a box marked “antiques to sell.”

Too bad. The truth is, we need concrete, acted out memorials—whether sacraments or reveilles or wreath-laying ceremonies in our city squares—we need these signs and memorials to keep both the words of the Bible, and the great events of our national past alive and relevant, so when our children ask, we can tell them.