

Devarim
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On July 4, 1867, right after the Civil War, General Grenville Dodge, the superintendent of construction for the Union Pacific Railroad, arrived at Crow Creek Crossing in Dakota territory to found a new city. Strategically located at a point where the land to the east sloped gradually downward for five hundred miles to the railroad's head in Council Bluffs, Iowa, and to the west rose twenty-two hundred feet towards Sherman Hill, this city was to become the gateway to the Rocky Mountains. General Dodge wanted the city named after himself, but it just so happened that he was off-site surveying when his friends and fellow officers had a party and named the city Cheyenne. By the time the first tracks were laid four months later, four thousand people had flocked to the area in hopes that the railroad would bring them prosperity. The newspapers back East, admiring how the city had sprung up like magic on the empty prairie, thought Cheyenne should be referred to as the Magic City, the Queen of the Plains.

Of course all this happened long before even our oldest congregants were born so we aren't privy to a first-hand account. But retelling the story of the founding of the city is the way that we keep the memory alive. It enables us to reconnect to the past and take pride in our heritage. Knowing about our roots makes it possible to pass down our history to our children and our grandchildren and thus to ensure that the events will not be forgotten.

In much the same way, this week's portion, Devarim, opens the book of Deuteronomy with stories. The Israelites are now all assembled on the banks of the Jordan River, readying to step across into the Promised Land. It is here that Moses must say good-bye to the Israelites who have journeyed throughout the wilderness for forty years under his leadership. This, like most partings of significance, is not a simple farewell. Moses knows that he will no longer be the leader of this people; that he will never see the Promised Land from the other side of the river, and he knows that his life is close to its end.

How does one begin to say such good-byes? Moses begins this process of saying good-bye through the telling of his story. Deuteronomy 1:1 reads, "These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel, on the banks of the Jordan." The rest of the book of Deuteronomy is Moses' voice, addressing the Israelites, preparing them for their future without him on the other side of the river. Moses then begins to recount the years in the wilderness, the battles fought against enemies, the challenges of setting up social structures within their wandering community, the complaints and betrayals that arose amongst them during those years.

The book of Deuteronomy is a re-telling of the Israelite experience. The first four books of the Torah are written in the voice of an unnamed narrator that chronicles the experiences and laws of our people. In Deuteronomy, Moses retells the story himself. Moses devotes his final days with the Israelites to reviewing and telling the story of their journey together, at the same time imparting God's blessings and vision for their future. This is his final gift to us as a Jewish people: teaching us the importance of telling stories.

Stories are an integral part of the human experience. They serve many functions, such as helping evoke memories and re-visiting one's past. In my work as a chaplain, I often visit with elderly people and ask them to share a memory of their earlier years with me. This often brings a smile and a readiness to open a door that is usually kept shut. They may share with me stories about their parents and siblings, or tell me about the first time that they met their spouse. I believe that these stories are sacred. They weave a beautiful fabric that has the ability to comfort and reassure. Just as these older people are able to tell me about the lives of their loved ones, so too, will they be remembered when they are no longer living.

Telling stories is therapeutic, as they help us work through difficult situations and arrive at new ways of understanding our past. Individuals who have experienced trauma may have the need to repeat over and over again the story of what had happened. The more one gains the ability to express one's experience through words, the more one is able to gain control over a situation and to understand how to move forward into life with new perspective. Many times, it is in the telling of stories that we find healing.

Stories are also a way of building community. When a group of people have a common experience, this is often solidified through the re-telling of the experience. Rachel Naomi Remen in her book Kitchen Table Wisdom writes, "Most parents know the importance of telling children their own story over and over again, so that they come to know in the tellings who they are and to whom they belong." As the Israelites are gathered to hear Moses' words, we gain greater insight as to who we are as a people. This common story binds us together.

Stories help us find closure in that they may impart our desires and hopes for the future. By telling our stories, others will be able to move forward with our blessings, advice, and wisdom. Stories help us create a vision for the future, as we understand the past. This is what Moses achieves as he addresses the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan river.

Through this example, may we all be able to find the stories that rest deep within our souls and find the words to share with others the gifts of our own experiences. May we have the ability to listen clearly to the stories of others with open hearts. And may we be able to hear God's presence reflected in the stories we all have to tell.