

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
MONDAY MARCH 31, 2025**

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

My fascination with memory began in seminary when I read Plato's *Phaedrus*. The image of the soul as two wild horses (understanding and will) who can fly before we are born but become bound to earth upon birth; these wild horses are led by a chariot driver (memory). It was like a light switch was flipped and the landscape of life was illumined. Memory is the driver, the leader, the guide; understanding and will are wild, competing forces ever in need of control and focus.

At this point in my way memory remained a kind of mystical presence, a part of me, but somehow not me. What I found most intriguing was the way memory was discarded by the Reformers, especially John Calvin as he sought to describe the Christian life. Faith was a firm and certain knowledge and our union with God was an engrafting of wills where we are made unto one substance with God so our actions more and more are led unto a holy life. Even though Calvin was very familiar with the classic definition of the soul he chose to reduce it to two parts instead of three. Memory could be conceived as "union" what he called "mystical union" with God, it could be seen as the presence of the Holy Spirit, but both of these were a stretch. Memory, for all intents and purposes, was laid aside in the 16th century.

As theology, and more specifically a theological understanding of knowledge, developed in the coming centuries the reduction continued. Reason, the new form of understanding, was pursued as a singular goal. The idea being that if we could find a place of reason where we could determine absolute truth, then our actions, our desires, our thoughts and beliefs could be acted upon without question and fault; we could find certainty. Here again the soul was reduced from two to one. We were now a mind in a body, not a soul with three parts embodied.

Depending on how you want to tell the story, this reduction floundered in the 19th century for the West. Hegel may be seen as creating a crack followed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Other look to Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. In a similar fashion Friedrich Schleiermacher theological claims of an evolving faith fostered a new sensibility. The new sense was history. Soon the critical reading of the bible that began in the Renaissance would adopt a quest for a historical understanding of God, the Bible, and creation. History, not dogma and doctrine, would become the landscape of understanding and justice. No longer was truth and authority to be given by God; they were to be unearthed in time, in the present and the past. History would become the new commandment. Versions of history emerged as the new distinction differentiating peoples and lands, movements and rights.

A few years ago as I explored the difference between the history that is beyond us and the history we live, I found a question in Exodus 20 which served much as the *Phaedrus* had many years ago. The question came from the distinction of generations. If you follow the commandments of God, then steadfast love will carry you for a thousand generations, which is quite a long time, perhaps even a metaphor for "all time." Yet, if you don't follow the commandments, there is a curse to be brought upon three and four generation, your children's children. The question was this: why three or four? Why not one or two; why not five or six?

The light which came illumined the church. For as I looked out at the congregation on Sunday morning the answer came to me: here are three and four generations, here is the living memory collected in song, in prayer, in meditation. Here was the answer. Their voice, their hopes and fears: this collected memory, history unfolding. The definitions, often fractured and opposing, were yet common and shared; their living memory shaded, engraved with their own gains and losses, was radically unique, but at the same time shared debt of generations. Each and all, one and the many owed a debt of gratitude, carried a mortgage of honor, a deep arrears of misdeeds.

The more I have looked at history through the lens of the second commandment, the more I can see the "price we must pay." The cost and economy of memory takes different forms, seeks a greater or lesser cost, but it is there. It is our definition our narrative; it is our story, our history. History, then, took on two forms. History as "recurrence", the perpetual turning of the ages Nietzsche described as a means of limiting fate from the dread of repetition; and, history became the collective memory of the living, the spirit of this age, this time, this gathering of three and four generations.

From this new definition of history the memorials and monuments and museums are rendered both opportunity and threat. The opportunity is to both pay our debt, and it is a chance to value the price paid by ages past. The long conversation of Grant and Lincoln at the edges of the mall in D.C. is a revelation of how the debt of the Civil War and the struggle for freedom was borne. The threat is found in the same conversation. If we do not hear and see the absence of liberty, the failure of the emancipation, the persistent need for freedom to finally cover the debt owed then the memorials become a curse not a blessing.

More than art or statuary, more than honor or gratitude or penance, the monument built by any generation must seek to be transparent, authentic, and true. For in this we offer what we owe without crafting an idol, history become a lie.

