



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Speak the Truth"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on May 26th, 2024, from 1 Samuel 8*

In 2009, a researcher named Fiona Broome shared her vivid memories of the tragedy that occurred when South African president Nelson Mandela died in prison in the 1980s. The only problem was, Mandela did not die in prison or in the 80's, but long after he was free in 2013. But Fiona was not alone, others remembered seeing news coverage of Mandela's prison death in the 80s and a speech by his widow. The false memories were likely the result of conflating Mandela with South African activist Steve Biko, who died in prison in 1977. To find out how many other people mistakenly believed Mandela died in prison in the 80s, Fiona started a website, and thousands wrote to her about having the exact same memory. It was shocking that a specific false memory was shared by such a large group of people, and Fiona coined this phenomenon of collective misremembrance the "Mandela Effect."

There are countless examples of the "Mandela Effect" in American culture today. Remember the popular children's book *The Berenstain Bears*? Scores of people remember it being spelled "S-T-E-I-N," but it was not. Others remember the logo of the clothing brand Fruit of the Loom featuring a cornucopia when the fruit was always on a plate. Countless Americans misremember Darth Vader telling Luke Skywalker, "Luke, I am your father," in *The Empire Strikes Back* when he actually said, "No, I am your father." Others will tell you confidently that Mr. Monopoly wore a monocle, or that Mickey Mouse had suspenders, or that there was a 90s movie titled *Shazaam* starring the actor Sinbad as a genie, none of which are true.

In fact, a recent study of the Mandela Effect at the University of Chicago¹, found that many individuals have the same false memories of images that they have never even seen before, which means there are certain stories in our culture have an intrinsic ability to create collective false memories. The research is rather disturbing when you think about the potential consequences. We all have our own unique individual experiences in our lives, yet we don't have the wildly divergent differences in our memories that we might imagine. Instead, as a society, we tend to remember, misremember, and forget many of the same things.



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Holidays like Memorial Day are a stunning reminder of the ways our country suffers from the Mandela Effect and collective amnesia. We tend to misremember and forget the same things about America, which is why some writers say we are trapped in a history we can't understand. Please don't misunderstand me. As a veteran myself, I believe setting aside time to remember those who have died is sacred, especially those who lost their lives in military combat.

We should all take time to remember the dead as a holy activity. However, every year the patriotic memorial of our dead soldiers evolves into a valorization of military power, the celebration of American empire, and the full-blown glorification of war itself; not to mention the crass commercialism of Memorial Day sales on everything from cars to mattresses. It is amazing how quickly honest patriotism mutates into Christian nationalism. We can go from zero to fascist in under three seconds!

The difference between honest patriotism and Christian nationalism comes down to three things: 1) how we remember, 2) how we dissent, and 3) how we tell the truth. The only way to overcome the Mandela Effect and our collective American amnesia, is to remember rightly, dissent vigilantly, and speak the truth. This is what it means both to be a follower of Jesus and a responsible citizen. As Frederick Douglass said, "The best friend of a nation is the one who most faithfully rebukes it for its sins—and its worst enemy is the one who, under the specious garb of patriotism seeks to excuse, palliate or defend them."ⁱⁱⁱ I believe we see a model of this brave rebuke and truth telling patriotism in our story today about the prophet Samuel.

1 Samuel 8 is one of the most anti-war, anti-monarchy, anti-imperial scriptures in the entire Bible. It tells us the story of a time when the elders of Israel came to Samuel the judge and said, "We want a king just like all the other nations." Samuel was shocked and distressed by their request. He felt rejected, but God told Samuel, "Listen, you are not the one they have rejected. They have rejected me. So, tell them the truth about what having a king ruling over them will mean. Let them have the king they want but give them a word of warning." So, Samuel told the people the king will take your sons and make them soldiers, take your daughters as cooks and bakers, take your best fields and vineyards, take a tenth of your grain and grapes, and take your best servants, cattle, donkeys, and sheep. And you will cry out against the king you have chosen, but God will not answer you. Yet, despite what Samuel said, the elders refused to listen and said, "We still want a king to rule over us."



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It couldn't have been easy for Samuel to speak truth to the elders. He already felt rejected, and God told him the elders wouldn't listen, yet God also told Samuel to prophesy anyway. Speaking the truth is always difficult and it always leads to rejection because as the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, "Humanity cannot bear very much reality." Yet speaking the truth is also a necessary requirement of what it means to be a servant of God and a follower of the one who is called the way, the truth, and the life. Why did God ask Samuel to speak the truth even if God knew the elders wouldn't listen? So, there would be a witness, a minority report, a dissenting opinion, a memory of a different reality, a testimony to an alternative way of life.

The most fascinating thing about this story is that it exists. I don't know how this story didn't end up on the cutting room floor. Obviously, the Israelites went to a monarchy. King David and King Solomon and every other king who came after them did exactly what Samuel had prophesied. They took everything from the people to engage in war, so it's surprising none of the kings of Israel had this scripture removed. It is a testimony against them and their authority to rule. How did it survive all the kings and monarchies of Israel? Well, some believe it was written after the monarchies failed and the people were taken into exile. Perhaps they wrote this text from Babylon in the hope of leaving a memory for future generations to learn from the mistakes they made in choosing kingship, empire, and war. Perhaps they hoped people would remember what could have been instead of what was, the truth of Samuel words and the possibility of a more peaceful world.

As Americans, we have misremembered our history, yet we have no minority report, dissenting opinion, or memory of an alternative reality like the people of Israel have in 1 Samuel 8. We have been taught the history the empire wants us to know. Even those who supplement their education barely scratch the surface of what truly happened. For instance, contrary to what we were taught in school, historian Gerald Horne has demonstrated that the preservation of slavery and settler colonialism were some of the strongest motivating factors for the Revolutionary War. In his book, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, Horne shows how that the Revolutionary War was in part a conservative movement the founding fathers fought to preserve their right to enslave others and expand their territory in indigenous lands.

WWII is often cited as the war with the most just cause in history. However, our memory of American involvement in WWII suffers from the Mandela Effect and collective amnesia. We did not enter the war as moral heroes to save the Jewish people from the holocaust. Anti-semitism was running wild in America at that time, and we turned away ships of Jewish immigrants back to their deaths in Europe.



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We only entered the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and ended the war with the some of the most gruesome acts of violence in the history, the fire-bombing of Tokyo and dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; leaving us the only empire in the world to have ever used weapons of mass destruction.

As we head into a summer of patriotic holidays it is important to consider the spiritual significance of memory. We must ask ourselves, “what exactly are we remembering on Memorial Day?” Are we remembering lost soldiers and their families, or are we remembering the military, the empire, and its wars? How we remember our past is extremely important. As George Orwell wrote in 1984, “Those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future.”

If we do not have a critique of American imperialism, then we are not responsible patriots, but have allowed ourselves to succumb to the propaganda. And even if we remember rightly, and dissent vigilantly, if we do not also possess the courage to tell the truth about it, we risk losing our moral witness as followers of Jesus who are called to, “speak the truth because the truth will set you free.”

The swift migration today toward Christian nationalism is deeply concerning, and the call for us to remember rightly, dissent vigilantly, and speak the truth is as urgent as ever. And I believe James Baldwin described the task we face most clearly when he wrote, “To be a writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. We are the generation that must throw everything into the endeavor to remake America into what we say we want it to be. Without this endeavor, we will [all] perish. The effort to become a great writer simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ This is what I believe it means to follow Jesus and be responsible citizens—tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.

It's impossible to know if it's false memory or collective amnesia, but most Americans are unaware of the radically liberative origins of Memorial Day. Memorial Day began as “Decoration Day” in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. It was a tradition initiated by the formerly enslaved to celebrate emancipation and commemorate those who died for the cause to end slavery. As the Civil War ended in April 1865, Union troops entered the city of Charleston and while white residents had largely fled, Black residents of Charleston remained to celebrate and welcome the troops. They held the first “Decoration Day” on May 1, 1865, which later evolved into what we now know as Memorial Day today.



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As Historian David Blight tells the story: "During the final year of the war, the Confederates had converted the slaveholder's horse track into an outdoor prison. Union soldiers were kept in horrible conditions in the infield; over 257 died of exposure or disease and were hastily buried in a mass grave behind the grandstand. After the war, black workers went to the site, properly re-buried the Union soldiers, built a fence around the cemetery, and an archway over an entrance inscribed with the words, 'Martyrs of the Race Course.' Then, they staged an unforgettable parade of 10,000 people, and the symbolic power of taking over the aristocracy's horse track (a display of wealth, leisure, and influence) was not lost on the freed people.

A correspondent from the New York Tribune witnessed the event and described 'a procession of friends and mourners as the United States never saw before.' At 9 a.m. on May 1st, the procession stepped off with 3,000 black schoolchildren carrying armloads of roses and singing 'John Brown's Body,' followed by several hundred black women with baskets of flowers, wreaths and crosses, and finally black men marching in cadence, followed by contingents of Union infantry and other citizens, and they sang spirituals and several local black ministers read scripture and preached."^{iv} Before all the flags, cookouts, and blockbuster sales, Memorial Day was a political celebration of liberation and emancipation, remembering those who fought to end the scourge of slavery. Nothing is more radical than singing about the resurrection of a militant evangelical abolitionist, "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on. Glory, glory hallelujah!" How we remember is critical, because we cannot live in the truth if we don't remember our history rightly.

The true origins of Memorial Day are an example of what theologian Johann Baptist Metz calls "dangerous memory,"^v the subversive memories that are collected, nurtured, and recalled by the oppressed peoples of history. Stories that are kept alive by the communities who witnessed the lives, struggles, and deaths of those with their backs against the wall. These true but unofficial memories often contradict the dominant narrative we've received from the state or what the powerful have determined to be "history," yet they keep open the possibility that reality, institutions, societies, and nations could be different than they are. Dangerous memories are a threat to those in positions of power because they are the seeds of resistance and change, markers of identity, wild affirmations of personhood, agency, and hope that another world is possible.



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1 Samuel 8 is a dangerous memory because it was written as a testimony against the monarchy of Israel—the grandiosity of kings, imperial thievery, excessive consumption, warmaking practices, and the forces of empire. It remains a witness to God’s justice and record of the truth that Samuel proclaimed. I’m not surprised this was the text Dr. William Barber chose to wrestle with when he spoke the truth from this pulpit on the Sunday after the 2016 election. Dr. Barber interpreted the election of Donald Trump as the rejection of God and a sign of America’s desire to have a “strong man” dictator like other nations. He called our standing room only congregation that night to revival, resistance, and redemption in the face of rejection.

Dr. Barber proclaimed, “God told to Samuel, ‘They are not rejecting you. They’ve rejected me my way of justice.’ But God did not tell Samuel, ‘You have the right to give up.’ God did not say to Samuel, ‘You can stop being a prophet.’ In fact, Samuel’s role as prophet and voice of truth grew even more necessary now as a continual check and critique of the new king—to try to help him do right, and to challenge him when he does wrong.”

Dr. Barber went on to say, “This is a moment in American history where our faith in God and the call to speak the truth must be real right now. In this moment, we must remember how our ancestors responded to disappointment by refusing to allow it to deter them from the march toward justice. This is the time when we must redouble our commitment to be instruments of truth, love, and justice. And Like Samuel, we must keep on speaking the truth and working for the justice God has called us to. This ‘rejection’ doesn’t change our calling.”^{vi}

Malcolm X summarized our calling in two sentences, “I am for truth, no matter who tells it. I am for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I’m a human being, first and foremost, and as such I’m for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.” Today we recall another dangerous memory of truth and justice as we come to the table to remember the life and death of Jesus. We come to the table where Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” to remember rightly, dissent vigilantly, and speak the truth. We come to remember the way, the truth, and the life that stands as a contrast to the horror of war, violence, and empire.



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We come to this table to free ourselves from delusion and denial. We come to this table to be liberated from the madness of the Mandela Effect and collective amnesia. We come to this table to learn how to remember rightly, dissent vigilantly, and speak the truth—a truth that is as liberative today as it was on that first Memorial Day in Charleston, SC. We come to this table to worship in spirit and truth, because truth is clarifying, truth is sanctifying, truth is purifying, truth is beautifying, and because only truth has the power to set us free. So may we renew our commitment to follow Jesus this Memorial Day by pledging ourselves to remember rightly, dissent vigilantly, and tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then, a little more.

ⁱ Sarah Steimer, “Can You Pick Out the Correct Versions of These Famous Pop Culture Icons,” *UChicago News*, July 15, 2022.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Douglass, letter to Horace Greeley on April 15, 1846.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1962.

^{iv} Donald Blight, “*The First Decoration Day*,” *Newark Star Ledger*, Apr 27, 2015.

^v Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 1977.

^{vi} Rev. Dr. William Barber, “Resistance, Revival, and Redemption in the Face of Rejection,” a sermon preached at Myers Park Baptist Church on November 13, 2016.