

## For Future Generations: Memory

TEXT: Exodus 13:17-22

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on November 3, 2024*

Natalie Sleeth's "Hymn of Promise" has a great line in verse 2 that says, "From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery." Of all the hymns I've sung throughout my life, I can't think of a line that has been more true-to-life than that one. The future is a mystery. Always. Every tomorrow is covered in fog until its morning breaks. But the contours of what happens in all our tomorrows have been shaped by countless yesterdays.

"From the past will come the future" by itself, sounds fatalistic—as if whatever happened in a similar situation in the past will always repeat itself. But Natalie Sleeth put the words in a song titled "Hymn of **Promise**" because she doesn't leave it there. She adds that what the future holds is still a mystery.

What she means is that the past will influence the future, and we should be no means ignore its power to do so; but the past is not static, which is where the promise part comes from. Every minute that ticks by adds to the gravity and influence of the past. We are, right now, right here in this room, creating another piece of the future.

By noon, everything about this service will be part of the past. The prayers, the music, this sermon and all the ideas and feelings that may be evoked by any of it will be past; and all of that will do its part to shape the future of everyone here and all those we encounter. What exactly that looks like will be a mystery until it happens; but every touch on the threads of time shape how that future unfolds.

The children who survived the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre are, this Tuesday, eligible to vote for the first time. From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery. That's what the verse means.

In and of itself that truth can be hopeful or fear-inducing. On the hopeful side, past failures do not imprison us. We're not doomed to repeat the past. We can act to shape a future with a positive outcome. On the flip side, past success doesn't guarantee that we will sail through easily on every try. In both cases, the past experience weighs on the future.

There is a definite benefit to being able to put our past behind us; to wake up each morning thinking, "This is the first day of the rest of my life." That's true; and it's far more helpful to our psyche than being unable to move on from past mistakes or hardship. But it can also lead us to ignore the very real fact that the past is influencing us, both personally and collectively, every minute of every day.

The lyrics to Hymn of Promise are not saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." They're saying, "In 24 hours, the choices you make today will be part of the past; and that past will contribute to shaping the future for you and for all future generations." Our greatest hope as well as our greatest danger comes from the fact that we are creating that influential past every minute of every day, both for ourselves and for each other.

The reason that what the future holds is a mystery is that the past is never quite done shaping the future. As long as time moves forward, the past is still being created. We got an extra hour of past last night, so I hope you used it well!

The passage from Exodus that Kim read earlier is one of those obscure bits of the Bible that has become a favorite of mine, and if there's a Bible passage that captures the overall message of "From the past will come the future, what it holds a mystery," it's this one. The context is the exodus of the enslaved Hebrews out of Egypt. They have a tiny little window to escape; but they still take the time to gather up one last thing to bring with them. They take the bones of their ancestor, Joseph, to bury him back in his homeland.

There is a critical lesson in that for all of us: We should always look toward the future, but we should never forget the bones of the past that have made us who we are. We shouldn't either inflate or discount the good or the difficult pieces of our past. If any of it changed, we would be someone different.

Even when we're on the road to the Promised Land with God's presence surely going before us, it's critical to pack up all the bones and bring them with us. From that past will come our future; and if we make up stuff about our past, or forget why we are on this particular road at this particular time, we'll be unprepared when the mysterious tomorrow finally unfolds.

On the biblical timeline, Joseph lived some 4 centuries before the Exodus; so, it's not like anyone alive knew him. But they did know his story, as it had been passed down orally for generations. And his story, which begins in Genesis 37 and goes for 13 chapters before the book ends with Joseph's passing, is both an origin story for the Hebrews and a promise.

It's an origin story because Joseph, who was Abraham great-grandson is how they got to Egypt in the first place. And it's a promise because Joseph was sold to slave traders by his brothers and was taken from his home in Canaan and eventually traded to a court official in Egypt. The very short version of those 13 chapters is that after an unjust accusation, Joseph is thrown in prison, where he gets to know his cellmates by interpreting their dreams, an ability he credits God for giving him.

News of that ability makes its way to Pharaoh, when he himself has a troubling dream about fat and skinny cows. Joseph tells him it's an agricultural prediction. There will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine and advises Pharaoh to plan accordingly. The king does just that, puts Joseph in charge of the effort, and that's why Egypt has food when the surrounding land does not when the famine finally hits.

The famine brings the rest of Joseph's family to Egypt as refugees, and Joseph, now part of Pharaoh's court, made sure they were given the best grazing land in the Nile Delta for their flocks. They settled there and prospered for generations, until a later Pharaoh lied about them and enslaved them.

When God uses Moses to free the Hebrews and they make a special point to go get the bones of Joseph, that is more than a gracious act for an ancestor. It is a sign that the memory of Joseph's story—sold into slavery, lied about, abused for years but then, by a gift from God was not only freed but became the second most powerful person in Egypt and provided his starving family with a land of abundance for them and their future generations—could also be their story. From that past their future is emerging.

The boy Moses—who, by Pharaoh's decree, was supposed to be killed at birth had survived and also ended up in Pharaoh's court. God had then empowered Moses, convincing Pharaoh to free them from bondage and had promised them settlement in a land flowing with milk and honey.

The story of Joseph was empowering, and they held onto both his bones and his story as a sign that this Promised Land, that they had only heard of in tales, was real and that God would guide them to it. Trust that the past would shape the future carried them for a generation of wilderness hardships before the land ever came into view. And the story endured, eventually empowering enslaved Africans in this country to trust that they, too had a Promised Land with a God that would lead the way to freedom.

Our past tells us what is possible. While historians are clear that history does not technically repeat—every situation is unique—it does rhyme. To recall a history is to bring to mind the future it created. In times of great upheaval like our own, it is the historians who can show us the most likely outcomes of our proposed actions. The exact future will remain a mystery until tomorrow becomes today. It won't repeat; but it will rhyme.

History is front and center this week in an election that has pitted the past against the future. But it's never the end of the story, so long as time exists. From all that is past—the good, the bad, and the ugly—will come our future; but that past is still being created day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. As a result, what the future holds will continue to be a mystery until the literal end of time. And as long as we draw breath, we have the power to shape it; because we are, every day, creating the past that will guide generations to come.

While we're hyper focused on the particular future that will arrive on Tuesday, All Saints Day is also a time to remember how our particular past at Crawford has shaped who we are today and how the past we're creating now will shape the future generations here. To bridge those two things, I invite you to remain seated but turn in the red hymnal to #707, Hymn of Promise, and just sing verse 2.

I want you to hear this in your head across the next 48 hours as a reminder that every action we take and every word we utter has consequence. It all becomes immediately part of the past that will give shape to the future for all generations.

[Sing v. 2 of #707 Hymn of Promise]

There's a song in every silence,  
seeking word and melody;  
there's a dawn in every darkness  
bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future;  
what it holds, a mystery,  
unrevealed until its season,  
something God alone can see.

As I said the first week of this series, “For Future Generations” is both a sermon series and a campaign. It’s not a political campaign, but a financial one, to make sure that we remain ready for all the opportunities and challenges that future generations at Crawford will face. While so many churches struggle, we are thriving because generations past paid it forward to make sure the mission and ministry at Crawford would remain viable.

After this congregation was formed in 1871, then called The Methodist Episcopal Society of Winchester, we had several physical church homes before landing here. The first service wasn’t held in this location until September 14, 1924; a hundred years ago last month. And that service wasn’t in the sanctuary, which was still under construction. Worship and Sunday School and meetings and everything else were held in the still unfinished basement below us, where the nursery school space is now.

“Well, if it wasn’t finished, why didn’t they just stay in the old church building downtown?” you might ask. The answer is that they sold it in 1920 and rented space, taking years to save up for a new building to accommodate a growing congregation. The sale of the old church, which no longer stands, gave the congregation enough money to purchase the estate on our current lot, but not to build something new.

The leadership at the time sought three-year pledges from 1922 – 1924 to raise the money for building. It was not enough. So, people went to businesses and friends in town, and the women of the church also pledged \$5,000 which is the equivalent of \$94,000 in today’s dollars.

They laid the cornerstone on October 7, 1923, but by winter the funds were running low and they stopped construction until the spring of 1924, continuing to hold services in rented space downtown.

They still had a parsonage on Myrtle Street and in April of 1924 they took out a three-year mortgage for \$25,000, which would be \$461,000 in today’s dollars, sold the parsonage on Myrtle Street and began renovating the estate’s carriage house, built about 1875, to be the new parsonage, which is where I live now. By fall of 1924 there was enough of a basement in this building that worship services could be moved out of the rented space and into the new, unfinished space for that first September service.

Fundraising continued throughout that time, but there was still no sanctuary. In early 1926, fundraising was halted, and our records report that this was “to give our people a chance to recover from the severe financial sacrifices that they had been making over a period of years.”

Shout out to the women of the congregation who stepped up again and held a supper to bring in new pledges. They got \$10,000 pledged or \$184,000 in today’s dollars. Not only that, but the ladies assumed the payment of the interest and as much as possible on the principal of the mortgage. The service of dedication for the completed sanctuary was held Sunday, October 10, 1926. The total cost of construction was \$148,399.03 or, in today’s dollars \$2,736,278.51.

In 1927, the chair of the building committee, Frank E. Crawford, offered to pay off the remaining \$30,000 mortgage if the church could be named for his wife. He made good on that promise on Easter Sunday in 1928 and

the church became Crawford Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church. The mortgage was burned on March 31, 1929. A very good time to get out of debt!

Mr. Crawford's wife, Winnifred, was active in the Ladies Aid Society, who had already done so much and she was the one who both selected and paid for the furnishings of our parlor, the Crawford Room, which was dedicated in December of 1924. Winnifred Crawford died just a year later on October 21, 1925 at age 50. Portraits of both Frank and Winnifred Crawford hang in the parlor. Frank Crawford lived to be 92, leaving this world September 28, 1967.

With the sanctuary complete, the downstairs space became the social hall and Sunday School space. But just 27 years after that mortgage burning, Crawford needed more space for our expanding membership and ministries and the systems and equipment in the building were in need of upgrades. In 1956 a new building committee was formed, and a loan of \$150,000 obtained.

The pastor at the time was Rev. Alliston Gifford, whose name graces the hall that was built with that money, along with the second story offices, choir space, and the added basement space below the hall. The heat was changed from coal to oil, the ladies got a dishwasher in the church kitchen, and it was all done the next year, consecrated on October 20, 1957.

That \$150,000 mortgage was paid off in five years, on April 6, 1961, which was the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the congregation in 1871. The cost for the hall, second story and added basement space came to \$152,323 (\$1,765,720.38 in today's dollars).

By 1990, the sanctuary and space below were 64 years old, the hall, second story, and additional basement were 33 years old and the parsonage was 115 years old. The congregation didn't need more space, but our Trustees began to worry that the funds on hand were barely able to cover regular maintenance and would be insufficient if a really big problem cropped up.

Their worries were not misplaced. In 1993, a basement ballast caught on fire requiring the replacement of the church's entire electrical system at a cost of \$180,000, just under \$400,000 in today's dollars. The Trustees had already been talking of trying to establish an endowment that could fund those kinds of extensive repairs and the fire kicked that into high gear, even though raising the money seemed like it would take 15 years and many doubted the church could sustain a drive lasting that long.

For the following, I'm going to read you part of a speech given by Colin Simson on September 25, 2011 about what happened next. "A quiet, elderly gentleman, who came to every Trustee meeting, but almost never said anything, finally spoke. Ken Lamprey, who was known at Crawford for his knowledge of finance, blurted out, "I know the people of Crawford. If you just ask them, they will always do the right thing." Doris Emmons...immediately said she would make all the necessary calls and get the campaign organized...the faithful people of Crawford responded. Ken went to the President of Winchester Cooperative Bank and negotiated very favorable loan terms—on the day of the charge conference.

...

"Not only did the endowment campaign solve our near-term emergency problems and start to solve some of our longer-term deferred maintenance problems, but the church moved from survival mode to mission mode, attracting new people eager to work with us."

That initial loan was for \$160,000. Fifteen years later, at the time of Colin's speech, the people of Crawford had given enough to pay off that loan plus another \$120,000. The initial principal for the endowment, which was named for Ken Lamprey after his passing, was \$278,758.98. With an additional gift of \$5,000 and several older bequests added to the fund in 2016, the Lamprey endowment now has a principal of \$433,964.69.

That amount generates between \$25k - \$30k per year for capital needs. But in today's financial environment that's the cost of one thing, or sometimes not even that. Next year the parsonage will be 150 years old. This year's electrical work at the parsonage alone was more than the disbursement from the Lamprey fund for the whole church for all of this year.

The gifts from Crawford's past saints have sustained us in these days. We have been able to continue and even expand mission and ministry, even during Covid, because we didn't have to tap our regular operating budget for capital expenses. The Saints of Crawford past made sure of that. But about once in every generation Crawford's members have been asked to step up their giving for future generations. To avoid eating into the principal of what they left us, we took out a loan of \$150,000. Our turn has come.

Because we have been able to keep up our buildings, we have been able to not only keep up but expand our ministries to the community. From the recitals and concerts that come for the wonderful acoustics in the sanctuary or the welcome of our tent out front, to now the second pre-school to occupy that basement that was our unfinished worship space 100 years ago last month, to the many community members who fill Gifford Hall every day of the week:

All grade levels of Storybook Workshop, the 70-plus members of Scout Troop 507 which has been with us now for more than 90 years, to AA meetings. Just since Covid, our space has attracted Lifeline Screening events who now provide that service here twice a year. And it isn't even limited to humans. In both the Spring and the Fall, Gifford Hall is filled with rescue dogs looking for their forever homes through Last Hope K9 Rescue.

And there are all the ways we use our space as well, as we come on Saturday to the one day each year when we use almost every square inch of the building for the faire that brings in people from near and far.

But we have been challenged to do more. As we have welcomed members from the former Second Congregational Church in Winchester, they came to us with an enormous gift to be put to work for music and community outreach. Our buildings currently limit the way we could be in ministry with that gift.

We have three floors, but only one of those is accessible for those with limited mobility. If I had a disability that left me dependent on a wheelchair, I couldn't have accepted the appointment to be your pastor. I couldn't make use of the parsonage; I couldn't even get to the pulpit here on the one supposedly accessible floor. The new school in the basement wouldn't be able to accept a wheelchair-bound child.

We have already had groups consider our space but opted to go elsewhere because it's too hot in the summer and we don't have air-conditioning. The downstairs bathrooms and kitchenette have never gotten the makeover they need since the sewage backup of about 8 years ago wreaked havoc on that part of the basement.

Crawford has a thing for food—beginning long ago when the Ladies Aid Society had a dinner that raised \$10,000 to the present day with our Chili Cook-off for JFON, lunch and pie making for the faire, and our weekly full-communion coffee hour. Think of the food ministries that could take place if we could renovate that entire kitchen!

And just imagine if we could not just hear well in the sanctuary—which we're still working on—but if we could also see. Maybe we could even restructure the chancel so that we could move without a Ph.D. in logistics and so that members with mobility challenges—whether temporary or permanent—could easily serve as liturgists or preach or serve communion.

During the announcements, Frank Leathers, our Chair of Trustees is going to say a few words to outline how today's Crawford can step up for our generation's turn to make our buildings fit for the ministry God has entrusted to us.

But first our choir will remind us that, whatever happens on Tuesday, love has eliminated the barriers between us and we will celebrate that unity at the Lord's Table. From that past will come our future, even if what that future holds remains a mystery. Amen.