

“Remember who you are”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Several years ago, Jenna gave me my heart’s deepest desire: a doggie DNA test. We swabbed the inside of Darby’s cheek, mailed it off, and a few weeks later received a family tree, showing Darby’s parents, grandparents, and great grandparents—half of them beagles, a quarter of them English springer spaniels, and a quarter of them a bunch of other breeds. Suddenly, this mystery dog that we had rescued made sense.

What we did for Darby millions of Americans are now doing for their *human* family members. Everywhere people are swabbing their cheeks and eagerly awaiting lost family histories. The results can be entertaining.

Take, for instance, Craig Cobb, a white supremacist and neo-Nazi, famous for trying to turn a North Dakota town into an all-white haven. So imagine his surprise when he received his DNA test results on national television and discovered that 14 percent of his ancestry hails from sub-Saharan Africa.

Other than such moments of delicious irony, though, what do such tests really offer? As humans, we share more than 99.9 percent of our DNA. Our genetic differences are infinitesimal. I suppose it’s because we believe that somewhere in that tiny percentage of DNA there’s a key to unlocking the secrets of who we are.

Moses would have given anything for that key.

Born a Hebrew but raised as an Egyptian, Moses grows up in a cloud of confusion, torn between two worlds, never knowing who he really is. He has no memory of his father, his ancestors, his people, his God.

The Hebrew people themselves may not know. They have labored and suffered for so long as slaves that it may be hard for them to remember that they descend from the same Joseph who was once a prince of Egypt. It may be especially hard for them to remember that they belong to a God who loves them.

When God calls to Moses from the burning bush, God is calling to a man who is lost. When Moses asks God, "*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses isn’t simply revealing his lack of confidence. He is literally asking, "Who am I?"

It is a question many of us ask ourselves every day. Who are we? Where do we come from? What kind of God do we serve? What kind of future do we have?

We are lost in a stream of information and choices. We run up against wall after wall, until the world stops making sense. We become characters without a story.

We are all familiar with the medical condition of amnesia. I submit to you that amnesia has become a systemic cultural condition. African American literature has long examined the subject of cultural amnesia, a loss of historical and personal memory imposed by the experience of slavery, the division of families, and the repression of traditional practices and beliefs. Hence, the reason for Alex Haley's novel, *Roots*, and the need to trace out his ancestry, to know from where and from whom he came. Hence, Malcolm X's decision to replace his last name, his slave name, "Little," with the "X." For Malcolm, that X represented the void in his identity, the part of him that had been stolen, the part he so desperately needed to recover but could not remember.

X marks the spot. It is branded on our skin. We scratch at it by searching for new fads that offer a group to which we can belong. We rub at it by posting on Facebook and Instagram seemingly irrelevant information, but which, beneath the surface, shout with ferocity, "I am here! Look at me! I exist!" We massage it with self-medication. We may even in our desperation cling to statues as a facsimile of our history, or resort to tribal mentalities about who's in and who's out. But it doesn't go away. The X remains, a perpetual mark of something we have lost, a vague feeling of being somehow dislodged, uprooted, unanchored.

It is in that longing that we encounter Moses in our text this morning, Moses who too is an X. And this is when the miracle happens. Now, I am not talking about the burning bush. I am talking about God's words to Moses: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

In this single statement from God, so often repeated in the Hebrew Bible, God gives Moses memory. God gives Moses a father, a people, a past, a God. This single sentence is a divine interruption into cultural amnesia. It is Alex Haley's *Roots* for Moses.

Moses' whole world changes because of this gift. He is not alone anymore. He has a purpose now: to be the agent of God's liberation for the Hebrew people. By telling Moses about his past, God gives Moses a future. And when Moses pushes back in fear and doubt, God reassures him, saying, "I will be with you." This is all Moses needs to know about himself. He is born into a covenant. He is chosen and loved by God. He is the one who walks with God, and through him, God will save God's people.

God's answer equips Moses to lead his people to freedom, and it could do the same for us—if we but listen.

God speaks to us now from the burning embers of Charlottesville to remind us of who we are. Because it's only in knowing who we are that we will find the strength and faith to step into the future and change the world.

Today, we receive that memory, that strength, in Communion. Jesus Christ becomes for us today our own divine interruption. And when amnesia is the norm, memory is power. Memory is identity; it is freedom. We take our name from Jesus Christ. We are *Christians*. We are followers of the one who defied both empire and death. We are children of God and are loved. The Holy Spirit courses through our veins.

Our history is there in the Bible. It tells of our creation, our sin, our exile and pain, our courage and prophecy, and our salvation.

Our history hangs on the walls of Westminster's narthex in the banners from our Confessions. It hangs in the banner printed on your bulletin today, representing the Theological Declaration of Barmen, issued in 1934 by church leaders in Germany to strengthen Christian resistance to the Nazi party and its takeover of the church. While other Christians exalted in white supremacy, nationalism, and the rule of Hitler as God's will, these Christians of the Barmen Declaration—our ancestors—stood against the tide, boldly declaring that Christ alone is Lord. They stood against idolatry and hate, at the risk of their own lives.

So when you go from this place today, when you speak truth to power, when you demand justice for the marginalized, when you forgive your enemy, when you declare that it is not OK for the wellbeing of some to be contingent upon the deprivation of others, when you declare Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, and when they ask you, "Who are you? Who are you to demand such things? Who are you to question how things are done?"... You tell them that you are a Christian.

You are a child of the God of your fathers and mothers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and the God who said that we would find her among the poor, the incarcerated, and the outcast. Remember who you are. You are Moses, called to set God's people free.

Amen.