

October 11, 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Psalm 22:1-15

by [Hardy Kim](#) in the [September 30, 2015](#) issue

This summer I had the great pleasure of traveling to Korea, where most of my extended family and all but a few of my wife's relatives live. The main purpose of our trip was to attend my wife's youngest sister's wedding, but we were also able to connect with many friends and family members we hadn't seen in a long time. The wedding was a wonderful celebration that, culturally speaking, felt as if it could have been taking place in Chicago.

There was, however, another family gathering—one more somber and steeped in Korean tradition. It opened me up to a deep sense of connection with my family and my ancestral culture. On one of our first evenings there, my family attended a ceremony memorializing the death of my great-grandfather. The ceremony, called *jesa*, occurs on the anniversary of an ancestor's death. Following traditional guidelines, family members prepare a meal to “serve” to the ancestor. Incense is lit, drinks are offered, and respect is shown through traditional greetings.

There are conflicting views on the spiritual significance of this ceremony. It was condemned as idol worship by Protestant missionaries, so modern Korean Protestants generally shun the practice. I believe that I can participate without any compromise to my own faith. But that theological controversy aside, for me the important thing about these gatherings is that they are among the few occasions when all the generations gather around common tables. We gather to eat—mountains of food are prepared—and to hear old, hard stories about those who have gone before us.

My parents left Korea when I was ten months old, so there are a lot of family stories that I don't know. As I gathered with my father's family to observe *jesa*, I heard for the first time the story of my great-grandfather's death. When the Korean War began in 1950, he sent the rest of the family south to flee the advancing North Korean forces. He stayed, because the land he farmed was all he had—and besides, what would they do to an old, humble farmer?

It turns out my great-grandfather was also on the municipal registry as a member of the local constabulary. He was executed by the occupying forces.

My uncle told me this story so that I could help keep our ancestor alive in memory, so that I could know whence I had come, so that I might try to understand that my present life is built on the many sacrifices of others I will never know. And perhaps so that I might gain the resolve necessary to do the same for others who come after me.

As a second-generation Korean American, it is often hard to identify the stories from my personal and ancestral past that can serve as reservoirs of understanding for the life I am living now. When it comes to my faith, it doesn't seem enough that my predominantly white church family taught me stories about God's faithfulness to the Israelites, or even to the Christians of the Reformation or the civil rights movement. What if I had more personal stories in which I could recognize God? "In you our ancestors trusted," I could proclaim from those stories. "They trusted, and you delivered them."

This is not just a problem for immigrants and minorities. I work with young adults at a large, progressive, downtown Chicago church. One of the biggest reasons our outreach to young adults works, I think, is that the group and the congregation allow these emerging—often struggling—adults to bring their genuine selves into a faith community. They don't have to check anything at the door. Not their honest thoughts or questions; not their lifestyles, their wants, desires, and ambitions; not even their questionable decisions or their persistent problems.

When it comes to dealing with their persistent problems—particularly when it comes to finding their place and identifying their calling—I think today's young adults increasingly experience the same poverty of stories that I have encountered. Marshall and Sara Duke, both psychologists, have studied the relationship between young people's knowledge of family stories and their resilience. They found that knowing even simple things about your own family can improve your chances of successfully facing life's challenges, especially disappointments and trauma.

Marshall Duke and another colleague developed a "Do You Know?" scale based on a series of questions: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your

family? Do you know the story of your birth? According to Bruce Feiler, who wrote about this research in a 2013 *New York Times* article, “The ‘Do You Know?’ scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.”

The psalmist cried out to God in a time of distress. Knowing this helps us understand that lifting our own difficulties to God is a faithful thing to do. Yet maybe the words of the psalm are not enough. Perhaps we need to write our own words, know our own stories, and find God’s saving power there as well.