

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Danger of Forgetfulness

Deuteronomy 4:9-20

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "It is quite true what philosophy says, that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be lived forward." The relationship between the past and the future, and what that means for the present, plays a big role in shaping our sense of identity and purpose. This is certainly true in the life of God's people. We as a church are continually looking back while also looking ahead. We're oriented toward what's out in front of us, but always mindful of what's behind us.

In today's text from Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the Israelites about where they're headed, but not without recalling where they've been. God's people stand on the threshold of the land of promise. They're on the verge of entering a land flowing with milk and honey. There they'll have the blessings of life and love and children. Rain will be plentiful. The soil will yield abundantly. Their livestock will multiply. They'll experience freedom from disease. They'll triumph over their enemies.

Moses himself won't get to experience this firsthand. God allows him to climb a mountain and see the promised land but not to enter it. And yet, while Moses can't cross over with the Israelites, he can accompany them on a trip back in time. That's what we hear him doing in our reading from Deuteronomy. "Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb," says Moses (v. 10). When Moses says "you," recall to whom he's speaking. The adults of the first generation of Israelites had died in the wilderness, so Moses is now addressing the next generation. These are the ones who will cross over into the land God has promised. In our text, they're very much standing there in front of Moses, listening to him, in that moment, that segment of time they occupy as they prepare to enter this new territory.

But through a strange bending of time, or perhaps we should say the presence of eternity in time, Moses speaks to them as those who were there at Mount Horeb, where God gave the Israelites the gift of the law, the Ten Commandments. "You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain... (v. 11). "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire" (v. 12). "He declared to you his covenant... (v. 13). Though they weren't actually there, they were there. Though distinct from the previous generation, they are one people, God's people.

This same reality is captured in the last verse of our text, where Moses reminds the Israelites of what God has done to make them who they are: "But as for you, the Lord took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are" (v. 20). They are God's possession, from generation to generation.

At the Passover meal, a child asks the elders, "Why is this night special above all other nights?" The father replies by telling the ancient story of Israel's liberation:

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed be he, had not brought our

forefathers forth from Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would still be Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt.... And the more one tells the story of the departure from Egypt, the more praiseworthy he is.¹

Notice how this story isn't just the recollection of some past historical event. It's not just about how "they" came out of Egypt. It's also about how "we" came out of Egypt. It's not just about how the Lord rescued "them." It's also about how the Lord rescued "us." It's not just about eating a meal and telling a story. It's also about how they, in the present, are included in that story and participate in that story.

To folks who, according to the historical clock, weren't even there, Moses says, "Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb." "Remember." It's an essential term in the life and vocabulary of the church. From the faith of God's people Israel, we followers of Jesus have inherited a precious word rich in significance and meaning. "Do this in remembrance of me." As I stand here at the pulpit this morning, those are the words above me on the banner and below me on the communion table. Remember.

When we disciples gather at this table for the Lord's Supper, as we did last Sunday, we're not just refreshing our spiritual memory. We're not just calling back to mind what happened way back then in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We're also being called to participate in that story, to get personally involved in those events, to share in the life of the people of God. In other words, you're being called to claim what God has done for you through the cross and the resurrection, to lay hold of and experience for yourself the salvation, the deliverance, the liberation from sin and death, that God has achieved through Jesus. By faith you identify yourself with Jesus and enter into this new reality of forgiveness and freedom that he has brought about.

The Lord's Supper isn't a memorial meal for a dead hero. It's not like a wake for a beloved but departed friend. No, the Lord's Supper is primarily about someone who's alive. It's not about a dead Messiah. It's about a Messiah who through death and resurrection is alive, present, in the midst of us, and at work in the world. We're not here in the presence of an idea, an abstraction, or a universal principle of some sort. We're here in the presence of the person of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who is seeking to do things in our lives and in our church.

So yes, "remember" can have the sense of simply recalling historical events. But in our lives as Christians, individually and together, "remember" has the sense of being reawakened to a past that's alive, shaping who we are in the present and calling us toward action in the future. This is critical year round, but especially during these days and weeks leading up to and beyond Easter. This is a period when we focus even more intently and deeply on the events at the center of our faith, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

We remember for many reasons, but especially because our memory of these events grounds our sense of identity and empowers our mission forward. There's a theologian who cites some research done on amnesia and memory loss. He points to two particular patients who struggled with the way that memories, especially recent ones, slipped away from them. He notes: "First, without memory, it's hard to cling to an identity. So one of the patients said: 'I don't have the moorings that other people draw on to know who they are.'" Second, it's hard to have hope when we don't know our past. As [the researcher] explained, 'The inability to invoke the past greatly impedes their ability to imagine a future.'"²

Living forward requires a strong sense of the past. This doesn't mean being so captured by what's behind you that you ignore what's ahead of you. President Harry Truman used to say that people who live in the past reminded him of a toy, a small wooden bird called the "Floogie Bird." Around the Floogie Bird's neck was a label that read, "I fly backwards. I don't care where I'm going. I just want to see where I've been."

In today's text, Moses reminds God's people of where they've been. Because they're one with the previous generation of Israelites, they went to Mount Horeb too, where God gave them his instructions for how to live in relationship with him and one another. And now, this revelation of God's will must govern their lives in the land where they're going. In order to live forward, they have to look backward.

Here in the life of our church, it can feel like we spend a lot of our time looking backward. Like all Christian congregations, we're in the business of remembering. Especially in Sunday School and worship, we're constantly recalling what God did in the lives of the people we learn about in the Bible. We're constantly hearing about and reflecting on God's action throughout history, the great deeds of our Lord in his relationship with humankind and with the whole creation. That's no minor thing, especially in a world where information and events enter our brains and exit our brains at rates previously unknown.

Author Nicholas Carr calls the internet a "technology of forgetfulness." In one of his books, he describes how digital distraction rewires our brains because of the plasticity of our neural pathways. Carr says, "The more we use the Web, the more we train our brain to be distracted—to process information very quickly and very efficiently but without sustained attention. That helps explain why many of us find it hard to concentrate even when we're away from our computers. Our brains become adept at forgetting, inept at remembering."³

This is one of the ways that Christian discipleship and the life of the church can be countercultural, because it calls upon you to stay attentive to the Lord, day in and day out, through reflection on the Scriptures, prayer, and service to God's kingdom. And then to come together, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, to recall, reflect on, and reexperience what God has done in our lives and in the world, most of all through Jesus Christ. This requires sustained attention, across time, to practice God's gift of memory. Remember, remember, remember.

When it comes to the connection between memory and identity, one person recalls the case of a man named "Benjamin Kyle":

In the early morning of August 31, 2004, employees of a Burger King in Richmond Hill, GA found a man unconscious next to a dumpster. He was naked, sunburnt, and had bites from red ants. His skull had three depressions, apparently from blunt force trauma. He also had amnesia and was unable to remember his own name, much less how he came to be found beaten behind a Burger King. The employees called 911, and he was taken to a hospital in Savannah; but without identity papers or memory, they listed him only as "Burger King Doe."

For more than ten years he was unable to remember his name and thus was unable to get a Social Security card. He could not obtain a job nor collect any kind of benefits from the government. He named himself "Benjamin Kyle," sensing that his first name might have been Benjamin, and he sought a community that knew him previously to help him piece together his identity. You see, without a community, this man had no access to his story. Finally, with the help of investigative reporters and genetic testing, "Benjamin Kyle" learned his real name and likely family of origin. As he started to identify with his community again he said, "Looking at all these names, all these people, kind of gives me a sense of belonging." He said, "I have a history. I'm not just some stranger that materialized out of thin air."⁴

In today's text, Moses reminds the people that they have a history, an identity, and a future. This is what can happen when we come together to remember the works of the Lord and to draw upon one another in order to know who we are, how we should live, and what God has promised. Otherwise, we become lost and at risk of trying to find who we are through love for and loyalty to false gods that can't do what the Lord has done for us. He's the one who has come to us to rescue us from sin and death, to bring us forgiveness and new life under his sovereign love. Only he can save us. We belong to him. The danger of forgetfulness is that we're prone to embrace idols that don't have the power to save and can't give us the hope of glory. But through faithful remembering, the voice of the Lord can be heard, telling us where we've been and where we're headed through Christ.

¹ Quoted in William H. Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1981) 14.

² Mark Meynell, "The Pulpit and the Body of Christ." Covenant Seminary 2017 Preaching Lectures.

³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010) 193-194.

⁴ Kent Justice, "Man with no name finally knows real identity." News4Jax.com (September 15, 2016).