

5th Sunday in Lent March 21, 2010

Isaiah 43:16-21 ðForget About It, and Praise Godö

We can go through life carrying some memories with us that we want to remember, but there are also some we usually want to forget. I remember riding with my family 35 minutes one way to attend Wednesday Lenten services when I was growing up. I didn't always want to make that trip and attend that service, but I do carry with me some happy memories of our family time together in the car during the six weeks in lent. I want to remember these trips with my family, particularly since we have all changed so much since then, have drifted away from each other, and our parents have gone to be with Jesus.

But there are can also be some things that we want to forget. Sometimes we do succeed in forgetting ó at least for a while ó but somehow the memory can reappear again in our minds, and then we remember. I'd like to forget some of the times I got in trouble with my father, and there are some other things I want to forget (but I won't talk about them here). After all, there are no do-over's in life!

What Memories come to mind for you – whether good or bad?

God gave the people of Israel some wonderful memories to carry with them through life. Just as Isaiah writes, God saw the troubles of the Israelites when they were living as slaves in Egypt in 1400 BC, and he did something about it. He sent Moses to lead the people out. However, it was not so easily to make their way out of Egypt unnoticed. They were over 1,000,000 people who were enslaved by the Egyptians, and they were forbidden to leave the land. God caught Pharaoh's attention when he brought 10 plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He turned their water into blood, he sent them gnats, locusts, and hail, he brought thick darkness on them, and he allowed the angel of death to pass through Egypt and kill the firstborn of every household ó both of people and of animal.

Pharaoh persisted in his disbelief and in his stubborn refusal to let Israel leave the land until the last plague. Then he almost kicked Israel out of the land. The Israelites left Egypt with all their possessions in the middle of the night, and they would never return to the place of their slavery again. God brought them to the edge of the sea which blocked them from going further, and at the same time Pharaoh changed his mind about letting the Israelites go, and he sent his soldiers to bring them back to Egypt. But God, who had acted mightily in sending the 10 plagues on the people, acted powerfully once again when he parted the waters of the sea to form a path through which Israel walked until they came through the other side.

When they crossed through to the other side, they could look back and see the soldiers following them. There were chariots and horses, with Pharaoh's army and their reinforcements, chasing after them through the parted waters to bring them home again and back to slavery. But God did something else very remarkable. He spoke the word and the waters of the sea came back together and began to flow again, and with that surge of water, the Egyptian army drowned and was washed up on the seashore ó dead!

Bible Story Memories Test:

Memories for Israel ó Do they want to Remember or Forget? [Remember]

Memories for Egypt ó Do they want to Remember or Forget? [Forget]

This mighty act of deliverance from Egypt and slavery became a very significant event in the minds and hearts of Israel, and it has been remembered from generation-to-generation down to the present day. If ever you were tempted to doubt that God was on your side, the Israelite need only remember how God acted powerfully to rescue his people. God rescued them when their enemies lay washed up on the shore. So God told Moses and the people that they should always remember their salvation from Egypt, and even to this day when the Passover is celebrated, this great saving event of the Old Testament is remembered and celebrated.

But God has a very big surprise for Israel in our text. God tells Israel to ðForget about it!ö He tells them to ðForget the former things; don't dwell on the past.ö What a strange message for Israel. Aside from their history as it descends from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their history as coming out of Egypt and slavery was too memorable and too fantastic to forget. However, this is the command that God gives to them. They are to leave this event in the past as if it never happened. They are to remember it no longer.

This brings me back to what I said earlier. There are some things we want to remember in life, and there are other things we want to forget. We usually want to forget our least proud moments or situations in life, but here God wants the people to forget the most spiritually relevant and memorable event of their entire lives. It would be as if God said to us not to celebrate Easter any longer. Forget about it, as if it never happened. Forget the victory Christ won for us. Or it would be as if God told us to forget our baptism by which we personally received forgiveness, life and salvation. Forget about it, as if it never happened. But these things are hard for us to forget because they are such good news for us. That is, when God acts on behalf of his people in such a gracious manner, it is not easy to forget. Nevertheless, the Israelites were told to forget about the past and their salvation from Egypt and slavery.

There are also things we must forget about when we come before God. Paul gives us an idea of what to leave behind when we face God. Paul writes that he has much to boast about to other people and before God ó he is a Hebrew, and thus one of the chosen people; he is descended from Benjamin, a tribe that was almost wiped out and the tribe from which Israel's first king came; he is a Pharisee, thus of the most strictest sect in observing the laws and traditions; and he calls himself blameless. We also could boast about our willingness to serve when called upon, to give when asked, to go beyond the call of duty when necessary. These things are sometimes held up by some people as the very evidence that God should let us into his heaven. And while these things are the evidence of our Christian faith in Christ, they are not the reason that we gain our place in heaven. Instead, we must forget about these things because there is absolutely nothing that we can hold up to God about ourselves in order to gain heaven. Before God we are poor, miserable sinners when it comes to seeking salvation, recognition, or even self-righteousness.

So God's big surprise for us, as well as for Israel, is to forget about it. Forget about trying to measure up to God's expectations from the commandments. Forget about trying to take a stand before God on our own personal merit. Instead, empty our hands and come before God with nothing, seeking his mercy, which is complete and overflowing for us in Jesus Christ.

God has something even greater in mind for Israel and for us! This something greater comes to us through Jesus Christ. And while there are certainly more things than the four I list on our insert today, these four statements flow from the Isaiah text this morning.

First, God makes a way through the desert of our sin. God's Word makes it clear that none of us is without sin. As David has written in Psalm 51, and certainly as your pastors have reminded all of us again and again, we are sinners from the time we are conceived in the womb of our mothers. Those who think of this embryo as simply as mass of tissue fail to see the deeper, spiritual need. They can deny sin, or state that sin is something that is learned or acquired sometime after birth. However, sin is something that clings to our flesh from the time of conception. And Jesus entered into the desert of our sinful natures when he entered our world of flesh and blood when God became flesh. The way that Jesus took into our world was a way that led him to the cross where he embraced our own sin and took its punishment before God. God received his once-and-for-all perfect sacrifice for our sin, and God raised him from the dead on the third day.

Second, God makes a way that restores all creation. The whole creation experienced a fall when Adam and Eve first tasted of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Paul writes in Romans that "the whole creation groans as it waits for the sons of God to be revealed" and "liberated from its bondage to decay." God's Word indeed speaks about a change that will occur in the created order. The creation will be restored when Christ returns and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Christ's sacrifice certainly benefits fallen humanity that puts its trust in Jesus, but it also has eternal benefit for our world that suffers along with us because of the fall into sin.

Third, God makes a way that satisfies our spiritual thirst. All people have a natural desire to know and worship God, their creator. However, since the fall into sin by Adam and Eve we cannot know God as God intends. And so some people spend their entire lives searching for God, and they will never find God until they meet Jesus Christ. We receive the benefits of Christ's life, death and resurrection through the waters of baptism that make us children of God. In this way Jesus satisfies our spiritual thirst. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, he spoke to her about his ability to give her "living water," which she greatly desired as she thought about her daily drudgery of going to the well to draw water. However, the water Jesus gives us washes away our sin and cleanses us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are people spiritually satisfied in their spiritual search for meaning in life.

Fourth and finally, God makes a way so that we can proclaim His praise. Christians know that the good news of Jesus Christ is not just for us. It is not just about me and my God, however personal God's invitation of salvation is to us. It is also a message the whole world needs to hear so that others' spiritual thirst can be satisfied in Christ who gives living water. Our natural response is to tell people when we have found something wonderful. And that is the message we have from God in Jesus Christ. We can tell other people that the things of this life, the disappointments, the pride, the self-seeking, and even the self-praise are nothing compared to the glory we will have eternally with God in heaven through the forgiveness of sins we receive in Jesus Christ.

We have many memories we carry with us through life ó some good memories and some not so good ones. However, when we are inclined to find our spiritual relevance or meaning in these, apart from Christ, God tells us to forget about it and focus on the memory of our Savior Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. This memory has lasting, eternal significance for Israel and for us because it is our very salvation and forgiveness of sins. Such memory stirs in us praise for our awesome, wonderful God who loves and cares for us.

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