

Lest We Forget

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Deuteronomy 8:11-20

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*Memory
makes us who
we are.*

Have you ever walked into a room in search of something but can't remember what you are looking for? Have you ever phoned someone and then drawn a blank on who you called? Have you ever exited a building and can't remember where you parked your car? Have you ever forgotten an appointment or spent time looking for your keys, wallet or purse or reading glasses? Do you have trouble remembering the name of someone you have just met? Can you remember your various computer passwords? Tell me these things have happened to you!

The process of remembering and forgetting is altogether mysterious to me. How can I commit sermons to memory, yet can't remember how to program the features on my cell phone? How can I remember something that happened 40 years earlier, but can't recall what I had for dinner a few nights ago?

When we lose our memory in significant ways, something in us dies. Any of you who have witnessed in family or friends the onset of dementia or Alzheimer's know how memory loss can diminish people.

We are a composite of memory. Memory makes us who we are.

Our experiences, good and bad, form who we are today.

The movie *Cinderella Man* tells the true story of a boxing legend named James Braddock, played by Russell Crowe. Jimmy's promising boxing career is cut short by injury and arthritis. When he can't find work on the docks of New Jersey during the Great Depression, Jimmy is forced to accept public welfare. Money is so scarce for Jimmy and his wife, Mae, played by Renee Zellweger, they are forced to send their children to live with relatives in the country. So, when the opportunity comes knocking for Jimmy to climb back in the ring, he jumps at the chance.

Now that Jimmy is boxing for a purpose, he starts winning. His comeback eventually earns him a fight with the World Heavyweight champion, Max Baer. Baer is a much feared fighter, having killed two men in the ring. Baer's handlers handpicked Jimmy, thinking he would become an easy payday for their legendary champion.

On the day of the big fight, Mae sneaks into Jimmy's Madison Square Garden dressing room. The look on her face sends everyone outside for a few moments. She locks eyes with Jimmy and, with a look of tender fierceness, utters the memorable words, "Just remember

“... much of what the Bible demands can be summed up in the single word—remember.”

-Abraham Heschel

who you are, Jimmy. You're the Bulldog of Bergen, and the Pride of New Jersey. You're everyone's hope and the kids' hero. And you're the champion of my heart.”

Remembering who we are makes all the difference. Incidentally, since some of you will be sure to ask me later, Jimmy wins the fight!

Remember who you are! Remember is an epic Biblical word. As I said last Sunday, Abraham Heschel, considered by many to be the most significant Jewish theologian of the 20th century, claims that “... much of what the Bible demands can be summed up in the single word—remember.”

Most often, God is the one doing the remembering. Scripture tells us that God remembers Moses. God remembers Rachel. God remembers his people Israel.

God's memory is never haphazard. It's not as if this all-knowing, all powerful God smacks His forehead with the heel of His hand and says, “Oops! I forgot Moses. I forgot Rachel. I'd better do something quick.” God never forgets His people. God always remembers. God remembers His covenant made with people (Psalms 105:8). God remembers His great love for us.

Incidentally, there are also some things God forgets. God forgets our sins. God says through the prophet Jeremiah, “I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more” (31:34; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17). What God forgives, God forgets. God has the

amazing capacity to obliterate any memory of our sins.

Our Scripture lesson from the book of Deuteronomy summons us to practice the discipline of remembering. We read in verse 18, “Remember the Lord your God.” Fifteen times in Deuteronomy we are charged to remember. Fourteen times we are warned not to forget.

I called Deuteronomy a book. Actually, Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons delivered by Moses on the occasion of entering the Promised Land. Moses is now an old man, so these sermons constitute his farewell address to his people. Over the last 40 years, God's people have wandered in the desert wilderness, relying on God for their very survival. God has led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God has fed them every morning with manna from heaven. Moses anticipates their settling down in the Promised Land, building homes and making money. Complacency is right around the corner. “When you have eaten your fill and built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God (8:12-14).

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates these verses in *The Message*. “Make sure that when you eat and are satisfied, build pleasant homes and settle in, see your flocks and herds flourish and more and more money come in, watch your standard of living going up and

The danger of prosperity is thinking I did it myself.

up—make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God, your God.”

Why would anyone ever forget God? Prosperity and pride have a lot to do with it. The danger of prosperity is thinking I did it myself. The hazard of affluence is feeling self-made. Beware of taking all the credit. It is God who gives us the ability to produce wealth.

Note the progression in these verses. Prosperity breeds complacency, complacency fosters pride and pride produces autonomy, and autonomy results in an attitude of forgetfulness toward God.

Moses warns his people “Do not say to yourself ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth...” (8:17-18).

Here's the same verse from The Message. “If you start thinking to yourselves, ‘I did all this. All by myself! I'm rich. It's all mine!’—well, think again. Remember that God, your God, gave you strength to produce all this wealth.”

Remember is the antidote for forgetting. “Remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth” (8:18). The word remember doesn't mean in Hebrew what it means in English. When we talk about remembering we merely bring to mind something that happened in the past. But the Hebrew notion of remembering brings a past event into the present,

so that what happened continues to happen now. Remembering evokes a memory to move us to action. We remember God's commands in order to obey them. We remember God's gracious acts of covenant faithfulness to express gratitude.

The Psalms rehearse the memory of God's goodness. Israel's three great festivals are designed to help people remember God's acts of covenant faithfulness. God's people are instructed in the great Shema, “Recite these stories to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your home” (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). That's why orthodox Jews to this day wear little leather boxes called phylacteries on their wrists containing Bible verses and post these verses, called mezuzah, on the door-posts of their homes.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a way of remembering. “Do this in remembrance of me.” Baptism is a sacrament of remembering. It calls us to remember Jesus' death and resurrection.

Our church's seven covenants are designed to help us remember. Pray Daily helps us remember. Worship Continually helps us remember.

Study Diligently helps us remember.

The Hebrew word for remember (zeker-zah-khor) is where we derive our English words memorial and monument. Vietnam and Korean War Memorials help us remember

“Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget-lest we forget.”

people who paid the ultimate price. The World War II Monument helps us remember the sacrifices people made to insure our freedom.

Memorial Day is a day for remembering. In 1868, flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. Memorial Day has since expanded to include all Americans who sacrificed their lives in the service of their country. That’s why American flags are placed on all 260,000 gravesites at Arlington Cemetery.

Memorial Day is nothing more than a three-day weekend to many Americans. It kicks off the start of the summer vacation season. How odd; this day of remembrance has led to so much forgetting.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called *Recessional* on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Kipling not only expresses admiration for the British Empire but also sounds a cautionary note about how pride and power can undermine the empire. When nations rise to wealth and power, they are inclined to forget God. Kipling’s immortal words, “Lest we forget,” are lifted from the King James version of Deuteronomy 6:12, “Beware, lest thou forget the Lord.” As Kipling expresses it in the refrain of the poem,

“Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget-lest we forget.”