

## REMEMBERING, FORGETTING, AND HOPING

Scriptures: Isaiah 43:14-21; 63:7-19

Fred Speakman, a former pastor at the Third Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, tells of a man who went to an old friend named John to ask for a loan. Since the man wanted the loan with no interest and no collateral, John was reluctant. He said to the man, "I don't think our friendship is that close." The friend was shocked. "John," he said, "how can you say that? We spent our childhood together! In school we were inseparable. How could you forget the time I saved you from drowning, the hours spent coaching you in calculus, the months I spent persuading my cousin to marry your sister, the fact that it was through my friendship that you got your start in business?" John said, "Oh, I remember all that. But what have you done for me lately?"

This story bears a remarkable similarity to our first scripture lesson. Isaiah 63:7 begins by remembering the past: "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us...." It goes on to tell how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could escape, and led the people of Israel through the wilderness, giving them food and water until God finally brought them to the promised land. But all that was in the past. By the time of Isaiah, chapter 63, some 600 years later, the situation had changed. The people of Israel had been defeated by their enemies, their cities had been destroyed, and many of the people had been taken into exile. Listen to Isaiah 63:11-13 and hear the people's disappointment:

Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flocks? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths?

"Oh we remember what God did in the past," the Israelites say. "But what has God done for us lately?"

Maybe you have wondered the same thing. Yes, God has created us. Yes, God has given us life. Yes, God did some amazing things in the Bible. But what about today? What about the mother of young children who is found to have a tumor? What about the young father who is killed in Iraq? What about the school children who are killed in a tornado? What about the prayers we offer every Sunday for peace in the world, for healing of the sick, for recovery for the addicted, for reconciliation of the estranged? What has God done for us lately?

Our second scripture lesson is part of God's answer to that question. Turn to Isaiah 43, beginning at verse 16 (OT, p. 672). It says,

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.

At this point Isaiah reminds us of what God has done in the past: how God parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could escape, then allowed the waters to return upon the Egyptian chariots and horses when they pursued them. That is what God did in the past.

But now look at verses 18-19. The Lord says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Basically God tells the people of Israel: “All those great things I have done for you in the past—forget about them. Put them out of your mind. I am going to do something new, something you did not even imagine.”

It would be like God saying to us here at Hamblen Park: “You know all the great things that Pastor Robin has done for you in the past: forget about it. Just dismiss it from your mind. Because I will do something totally new in your future.”

Of course, God does not really want us to forget Pastor Robin and her witness to Christ over these last 13 years. Nor does God want the Israelites to forget all that God has done in their past. Verses 16-17 are a reminder of what God has done in the past. That reminder is important, because the future that God has for us is often based on the past. Look at Isaiah 43:19. God says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” In the past God made a path through the Red Sea and provided water in the wilderness, so that the Israelites could escape from slavery in Egypt. But now God will make a way through the wilderness and provide water in the desert so that the Israelites can return from exile in Babylon. The new work of God is patterned on the previous work of God.

In Isaiah 46:9 the Lord says, “Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; . . .” Isn’t that interesting? In Isaiah 46 the Lord says, “Remember the former things!” But here in Isaiah 43 the Lord says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. . . .” God wants us to remember the past but not to be stuck in it.

While I was a student at Whitworth College in the mid-1970s, some friends and I began visiting an elderly woman named Lillie who lived alone in a ramshackle house on the north side of Spokane. One of my friends met her at a department store in North Town, and she seemed so lonely and so disheveled, almost like a bag lady, that a group of us began visiting her. The first time we went to her house—this was about 1974—it was clear that she was in mourning. The drapes were closed, and she sat on the sofa with tears in her eyes holding a picture of her deceased husband. As she held the picture in her arms she talked about how good her husband had been to her and how anguished she felt when he was stricken with cancer. I finally worked up the nerve to ask her when he died. She said, “1957.” She was still in the same condition as recently as 1994, the last time I saw her before she died. The drapes were still closed, and the same picture of her husband was propped up on the sofa next to where she sat.

Please understand. There is nothing wrong with cherishing memories. There is nothing wrong with mourning the loss of loved ones, even years or decades later. But it is a problem if

you get stuck in the past. Because if you are stuck in the past, you are closed to the new thing God might do in your life.

If you have young children and you yearn for the days when you could still eat a meal while it was hot, when you could actually sit and read the paper or go to the bathroom without a child camped outside your door calling for you; if you yearn for the freedom and independence you enjoyed before you had children, forget it. Those days are over. “Do not remember the former things,” God says. “I am about to do a new thing.” Children are a new chapter in your life, a time when God can do something new, if you are open to it.

Or if you are the parent of a teenager or a young adult and if you yearn to go back to the days when your children were young and still dependent on you, if you yearn for the time when your children still looked up to you, forget it. Those days are over. “Do not remember the former things,” God says. “I am about to do a new thing.” Being the parent of teenager or being an empty-nester is a new chapter in your life, a time when God can do something new if you are open to it.

In the same way, if you have lost a spouse, or if you have lost some capability that you deeply miss and deeply mourn, please do not assume that your life is over. To you God says, “Do not remember the former things, I am doing a new thing; even now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” There is still another chapter in your life waiting to be written, and its author is God.

Which brings me to our church’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Today is a day for remembering the past. Today we remember those 72 people who founded Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church: people who left other churches to come and start this one, people who answered the door when Pastor Booher knocked and invited them to join this new fellowship. Today we also remember all the people who kept this church going over the years: the people who sat around a table after worship counting the offering and deciding what bills they could pay that week, the people who mowed the lawn and fixed the toilets and directed the choir and taught Sunday School and led the youth group, the people dared to commit 20% of their church pledges to mission outside the church even when they could not balance the budget inside the church. Today is the day to remember Presbyterians from around the country who gave money to build this church even though they had never heard of and probably could not pronounce Spokane, Washington. Today is the day to remember those who gave to build our fellowship hall, kitchen, sanctuary, and the additional classrooms we have added over the years. Even more important, today is a day to remember the people who have touched lives in this place: elders, deacons, teachers, youth leaders, choir singers, circle members, and, yes, even pastors, not least of which is the associate pastor who has served us for one-quarter of our church’s entire history. Today is a day for remembering the past.

But now, forget it. Put it out of your mind. Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. God is about to do a new thing, and if you don’t open your mind and your heart to it, you will miss it.

- Ken Onstot  
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