

In the early 1970s, two young men returned to this country
after some harrowing experiences in the War in Viet Nam.

The first was a PILOT.

He had been shot down over North Viet Nam, captured, and held in
prison for several years.

“I came close to losing my mind,” he reported.

**“The only way I held on to my sanity was by remembering
songs and verses from my Sunday School days.”**

The second man served in the INFANTRY.

He saw battles, blood, and death.
one of his buddies died in his arms.

After his return home, the memories haunted him.

He suffered nightmares.

Went into a profound depression.

Eventually he committed suicide.

Such is the power of our MEMORIES!

Some of us, like that imprisoned pilot, draw on our memories
for STRENGTH in trying times.

We remember the love in our childhood home,
the encouraging words of a respected coach,
the birth of our child,
or an answered prayer.

Others of us, like that infantryman, find our memories a source of
GUILT and BITTERNESS as we recall
an abusive parent,
the day we were fired from a job,
or an unexpected betrayal by someone we considered a friend.

What sort of MEMORIES did you bring in the door with you this morning?
And what are those memories doing to you?

We have gathered at church today for this very purpose –
to help each other REMEMBER,
and in that remembering to find hope and strength for living.

God Himself commands it:

“REMEMBER the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”

“REMEMBER your Creator in the days of your youth.”

“Do this in REMEMBRANCE of me.”

This morning’s OT lesson is another of the places where God instructs our remembering...

Here’s the setting:

The Israelites are about to enter Canaan where they will start a new life.

When the first crop is planted, and the first harvest is cut, God tells them,
each farmer is to take a bundle of produce to the priest at the
tabernacle and say the following:

READ THE TEXT

“Start,” God tells them, “by remembering WHO YOU ARE.”

A goodly part of that remembering will be UNPLEASANT!

**A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt...
there he became a nation...and the Egyptians treated us harshly,
and afflicted us, and laid on us hard bondage**

Israel remembered, first, that it had been a nation afflicted and enslaved.

It sounds like Alex Haley’s book ROOTS,
in which Haley recalls the terrible story of his ancestor Kunta Kinte,
kidnapped from Africa, dragged aboard a slave ship,
and sold into bondage in America.

Same with us. We’ve been slaves too!

A significant part of our lives has reflected the affliction and our very real
BONDAGE TO SIN.

A slavery into which we were born, and then
chose to reinforce day after day in habitual disobedience to God.

Remember, says this text. Remember who you WERE.
Remember the stupid, selfish, hurtful things you've said and done!

Maybe you say "WHY?"

Why remember THAT? Wouldn't it be better to FORGET?

The human brain can do that in some extreme circumstances, you know.
Certain blocks of time, certain painful experiences
can be erased from the conscious mind as a result of shock or trauma...
it's called AMNESIA.

Sometimes the forgetting happens for other reasons.
Medication can dull the memory. Disease can erase it too.

Years ago we lived across the street from a woman named Marie,
who was dying of cancer.

She had been more than a neighbor to us. She was also a friend
who showed special kindness to our children.

Near the end, as she received increasing medication,
she lost her MEMORY.

She lost track of the long ordeal of her illness.

She did not remember WHO I WAS
nor even WHO SHE WAS!

Although it brought her a measure of PEACE,
I remember feeling EMPTY inside, for she was no longer herself.

Some of us feel that's the best way to cope with painful memories.

"Just forget about it!" people advise each other.

Have you tried that?...

Tried to put out of your mind the people who hurt you,
or your own embarrassing failures or shameful sins?

It's not easy.

Often those memories are simply submerged to a deeper level in your mind,
from which they emerge again and again as nightmares,
unexplainable depression,
or even physical illness.

NO, says God.

I want you to remember who you are, where you've been, and what has happened to you...

but don't stop there, so that you are left with guilt or bitterness.

Remember something more...

REMEMBER WHAT I HAVE DONE FOR YOU!

Then we cried to the Lord...and the Lord heard our affliction...and the Lord brought us out of Egypt...into this place.

More than anything else, the Israelites held on to the memory of how God had done that for them – the miracle of the EXODUS.

Each Passover they retold it. Re-lived it.

He brought us out of Egypt... brought us into this place.

Not "them," did you notice, but "US"!

When I was a boy there was a TV show called "You Are There," narrated by Walter Cronkite. The viewer was taken back in history to some great event...and through the eyes of the TV camera, he was invited IN to become PART OF IT.

In the same way, God invited the Israelites. "You are there!" He told them.

There at the Red Sea with your grandparents, watching the waters part!

"You are there" walking through on dry ground,

safe now on the other side,

no longer slaves, but a free people in your own land!

We Christians talk that way too.

We have come through deep waters and stand safe on the "other side" of Easter.

We too remember God's mighty acts of deliverance.

We recite them in our Creed:

**I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and
was buried, the third day he rose again...**

Ah, friend, “were you there?” when they crucified my Lord...

“Were you there” when they nailed him to the tree?

YES, we were!

During this Lenten season, that’s where we’re going again,
to stand beneath the cross with Mary and John, look up into His face,
and remember those moments.

And WHY ALL THIS REMEMBERING?

Am I selling tickets for an ecclesiastical nostalgia trip?

Urging you to “live in the past”?

As answer, let me take you back to the text in Deuteronomy.

After reciting all the past mercies of God, the worshipper is to say:

Behold, NOW I bring you the first of the fruit of the ground
whereupon he sets his offering on the ground and rejoices before the Lord.

The point is

REMEMBERING THE PAST is designed to help us LIVE IN THE PRESENT –
to REJOICE IN THE NOW!

People who remember the mercy of God are enabled to do three important things.

FIRST, they become generous givers to others.

I bring you the first of the fruit of the ground
the worshipper says to God.

And he means it, for He remembers: GOD IS MY PROVIDER!

In the early 1990s a citrus grower in Florida experienced a devastating setback when a large portion of his crop froze in a freak storm. Nevertheless, he later gave a large gift – over \$2 million – as a special offering to his church.

When asked about the timing of his extraordinary gift, he replied simply, “It seemed to me a good time to remember all the good years that have gone before. I’ve learned God will provide.”

Will we take a moment this morning to stop and remember

“all the good years” God has given us?

People who remember the mercy of God are helped to do a SECOND thing:

To have COURAGE in the face of trouble.

Is there anything that frightens me?

I stop to remember: HE DIVIDED THE SEA!

RAISED JESUS FROM DEATH!

John Chrysostom, a great Christian preacher in the early centuries, did something similar. When the Empress Eudoxia threatened to imprison or banish him for his bold messages, he told a friend,

“When I wonder if she will banish me, I remember that the earth is the Lord’s.

When I fear she will take away my goods, I remember Job, who said, ‘Naked came I into the world, and naked must I return.’

Will she stone me? I remember Stephen, and I take courage.”

Facing some trial just now? Something fearful?

Stop and remember his word: “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God” and TAKE COURAGE!

THIRD, and finally, remember the mercy of God encourages us to take our sins to God and confess them boldly.

What enabled the Prodigal son to head for home?

Wasn’t it the memory of how his father had always treated him?

Standing at the cross, we prodigal sons and daughters hear Jesus say,

Father, forgive them... US!

and we find hope and peace again.

We ARE FORGIVEN. Now we too FORGIVE!

That’s why you have been drawn here today, however it happened.

God was drawing you here – to come and remember Jesus Christ...

and to LET THAT MEMORY CLEANSE ALL THE OTHERS.

Don’t be afraid.

Unlock the closet door and let them all tumble out – the painful, frightening, bitter memories you’ve locked in there for ever so long.

Take them to the cross. There remember that He loved you dearly, and He will wash them clean.