

A Thanksgiving To Remember

November 26, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

My sermon this morning is not centered on a central text, but rather on a central theme: that what we know, what we have been taught, is a cause for thanksgiving, and is worth remembering. If there was a main text for this sermon, it might be Colossians 2:6-7 which reads this way:

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6-7 ESV)

Katie, Grace, and I have feasted on homemade dinners for weeks now—made by you. We have received cards and loving texts. Three of our shepherds stopped by just to hug our necks. Grace has enjoyed her very first sleep-overs with honorary grandparents from this congregation. When Katie was most in need of something to bring her joy and gladness, four of our close friends in this family came over, broke in, and cleaned our house. It brought my wife to tears. The love has been so overwhelming, I couldn’t help but tell others about it. And one of my friends and former colleagues at Harding responded with the best line: “I love it,” he said, “when the church is the church.” Amen.

In the words of the Apostle Paul to his friend Philemon:

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you (Philemon 4-7).

Sometimes I am forced to remind myself what I do up here every Sunday. One of my favorite practitioners of this trade once said, “a preacher learns the song in your heart and sings it back to you when you forget how it goes.”¹

¹ Sam Wells in his final sermon at Duke Divinity School Chapel (May 6, 2012).
<https://today.duke.edu/2012/05/wellsfinale>

There are times in your life when the song in your heart is a waltz, because the skies are pouring out happiness, and all you can do is dance in the rain. These are times you wish would last forever. Times you never *want* to forget.

And then there are days, and long sleepless nights, when the song in your heart is an old country ballad, as you recount all the things you have lost. Those are times you *want* to forget. And in those moments, you come to church to be *reminded* that God feels the pain of your loss, but that loss is not the end of your story.

Sometimes, that song that needs to be sung by way of reminder is the song playing in my *own* heart.

Katie and I experienced a Thanksgiving we will never forget. As most of you know, Katie's father—and my friend and father-in-law, Dave—went to the ER complaining of back pain. Less than 48 hours later, the doctors called the family to his bedside to say their final goodbye.

Katie and I were unable to make the trip to Indiana; so we watched the funeral from our bed on a Saturday morning. Just 12 hours later, early on the first day of the week, when God breathes fresh new life into the world, it was our turn to be in a hospital, where Katie gave birth to the most beautiful baby boy you have ever laid eyes on. Henry David Anthony Guy graced the world on November 19, and our world will never be the same.

Katie's mom has had so much to take care of, as you can imagine, but on Thursday—Thanksgiving Day—she braved the roads and made the 10-hour drive to reunite with Katie, to hug her granddaughter Grace, and to hold her new grandson in her arms.

NEVER FORGET

There are moments in our lives where we don't know what to say, but we know we will never forget.

160 years ago, President Abraham Lincoln had to imagine what to say to a war-torn country struggling to understand the loss of life. In the summer of 1863, Lincoln received a very short letter. It seemed the renowned speaker Edward Everett was to appear at Gettysburg for a memorial. His speech would be the main event. Everett had been a Representative, Senator, Governor of Massachusetts, and a Vice-Presidential candidate. And now, he was serving as president of Harvard. The speaker was set, and

the date was set. I remember the date because it holds a special place in my heart. November 19.

And in this short letter, almost as an afterthought, Lincoln was asked to maybe give a few words to commemorate the ground.

When the day arrived, Everett spoke for several hours. Lincoln—less than 3 minutes. But his speech is the one we all remember. The one that begins “Four score and seven years ago.”

And in the third paragraph of his short speech on that chilling afternoon of November 19, Lincoln said “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it will never forget what they did here.”

Never forget. It’s a phrase used in most holocaust memorials. It speaks to the sense that deep in our consciousness—deep in our psyche—we think there is something worse than death: to be *forgotten*.

In the 49th chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah is reflecting on the incredible loss that Israel is going to experience when God brings his own people into captivity. The chapter abounds with God’s reassurance—that even though they may experience days or even years of sadness, he will bring them back. But the people are having a hard time believing it. As you read through the chapter, you see a mixture of joy and sadness, hope and despair. The Lord will delight in his people, says Isaiah. But in verse 14, “Zion says the Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me.”

Have you ever had a moment when you thought all you had ever done would be laid in the sands of the earth, and all you have been working for will be forgotten?

In Washington, D.C., stands the Vietnam Veterans memorial wall, completed in 1982. A young Yale university student designed the wall for an extra credit project for his architecture class. It starts as a small triangle in the corners, standing only 8 inches in height. As you walk along, the wall rises, 250 feet long, and meets in the middle at about 10 feet tall. And etched in stone along these granite walls are 55,185 names! It is a reflecting wall—not just to reflect the names of those who died but the face of the people standing there. Most of us go looking for names of people we know; and when we are done, we follow our curiosity by looking for anyone who bears our name. Here is where the design works best: as you look at the names, you see yourself; you see the common bond you have with those who have gone before.

In Isaiah 49, what hits God like a ton of bricks is to hear his people say “I am forgotten!” And so, God responds:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Behold...your walls are continually before me.
[And] I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” [Isa 49:15-16 ESV]

You know, *writing* on the palms of one’s hands goes away. Any schoolboy who has made the mistake of trying to cheat that way knows that. But *engraving* is permanent. God engraves memories in the palms of his hands.

Perhaps you remember a story recorded in John 20. Jesus appears in the middle of a room where the apostles are reflecting on the loss of their Lord. And then, the risen Jesus says to Thomas “put your fingers in the holes in my hands” ... as if to say “I will never forget you for the memory of what I did for you is ever before me—engraved in the palms of my hands.”

Writing names is a metaphor for knowing we are in the hands of a God who does not forget us. In Luke 10, Jesus told his followers, don’t rejoice because you are able to cast demons out; rejoice because your names are inscribed in heaven (Luke 10:21 NCB). In Revelation 21, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, is described as a great walled city with 12 gates, guarded by 12 angels, and on each gate are engraved the names given to the people of God (Rev 21:12 EHV). God doesn’t forget. God remembers.

In Genesis 8, we find ourselves right in the middle of the flood story. The whole world, it seems, has gone astray, and God has looked all over the place for a people in whom he could find favor. And here we have this gem of a line: “God remembered Noah” (Gen 8:1). It’s the kind of character reference we need to hear about God that carries through the narrative of scripture. It’s how we know to pray with Habakkuk “O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work... [and] in [your] wrath remember mercy” (Habakkuk 3:2).

Then we have Genesis 30. Rachel has been barren. She feels so discounted. She feels her life will mean nothing. That is, until the text tells us the line we’ve been waiting for: “God remembered Rachel. He listened to her. And he opened her womb” (Gen 30:22).

We barely begin reading Exodus before the people of God gather a collective cry of oppression. Stuck in Egypt, and—to the eyes of Pharaoh—without a prayer. But God heard their cry, says the Bible, and he remembered the covenant he had made (Ex 2:24).

It's this striking language of remembrance that flows from the mouth of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, as he pours forth praise at the specter of hope arising in his own day:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us...
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:68-73)

My God does not forget the good stuff! When it comes to you, the difference you make, the kind of person he has called you to be, my God does not forget.

He remembers you.

And he wants us to remember him. As the children of Israel prepared to leave the grip of Pharaoh, God gave his people a meal—the Passover meal—to remember. On the night in which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took the bread and the cup of that passover meal and he told his disciples “this is my body. This is my blood. Do this and remember me.”

ALWAYS REMEMBER

There's a reason God in the Old Testament, and the Son of God in the New Testament chose a meal by way of reminder. Because it's something we do every day. For those of us in the modern world, several times a day. Every time we feed our hunger, we remember the bread of life. And it's no coincidence that the elements that night were the most simple kind—bread, and wine: something that would have been on everyone's shelf and table. The same reason humans were made of dust, and we are born again by the Spirit of God as we pass through the water. Water, dust, bread, and wine—the simplest, most ordinary things on earth. The things we experience a thousand times; the things we see everywhere we look.

So that every day, in every way, we would remember...we would remember that He has not forgotten us.

When we forget how loved we are, how saved we are, how infinitely better life is for us knowing Jesus Christ, let us follow the advice of the Apostle Paul: “remember that you were once separated from Christ, aliens from the covenant of promise, with no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:11-12). But God remembered his covenant. God remembered his plan of love. And God remembered you.

When the messenger from God appeared to Cornelius in a vision, he said, “God has heard your prayer, and your gifts to the poor have been remembered by God” (Acts 10:31). God knows you, loves you, watches you, is with you, and he remembers you.

And when you feel as though you are surrounded by nothing but pain, and sorrow, and loss—hear the stirring anecdote from the Apostle to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel” (2 Tim 2:8).

We are held up, held on, and held forth by a power greater than sin, death, and the grave. It was Jonah who, in the darkness of the deep, declared, “when my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You, in your Holy Temple” (Jonah 2:7). Good thing. Because in the words of Paul, “remember it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you” (Rom 11:18). When Israel fell and fell again, they found ways to return, to start anew; the Psalmist puts it this way: “They remembered that God was their rock” (Psalm 78:35).

And so it is—that we are at times tempted to forget; but He will not forget. We are prone to lose track of it all; but He will never loosen his gaze upon us. And when we feel helpless and alone, staring face to face with only the tragedy of our lives, where we can only muster up the courage to say what the thief said to Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus looks back tenderly to us, you and me, precious children, living and loving in the light of His grace, and he whispers sweetly to us, “I already have. It is finished. Behold all things are new.”

And that is why the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and his mercies never come to an end. WE remember the wormwood and the gall. WE remember the bitterness, and WE cry out for God to remember us in our affliction. But this we remember, and in this we find hope: His mercies must be new every morning, for in his resurrection, Jesus has declared once and for all that pain, loss, and death will never be the end of the story. The new day has already dawned, and we are living in the light of His coming.

And that is why every day, in every way, we can say “Thanks be unto God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57).

The Apostle John provides perhaps the most fitting conclusion to our sermon this morning—a sermon about remembering God at work, even in our most difficult days. Remembering that God has not abandoned you. Remembering that his goodness is fresh and new every morning, and that even the darkness can be but a passageway to reveal the light.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:20-22).