

Sermon: The One Who Remembers

Year C, Lent 4

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#); [Psalm 126](#); [Philippians 3:4b-14](#); [John 12:1-8](#)

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When I was in kindergarten, we rented a house in Medford, Mass which I can barely remember. I remember how tightly packed together the houses were. There were always cars parked along the curbs on both sides of the street. It was a two way street, busy because it connected a bunch of busy streets. So when it was time for me to learn to ride a two wheeler without training wheels, we had to go somewhere else. My parents picked a quiet street/lane/cul de sac, but it wasn't paved. And we all know how much harder it is to balance on a bike that's going slowly, than on one that's go any kind of speed up. I can remember how overwhelmingly frustrated I was. It was so difficult and I was way more of a reader than a cyclist. I can remember my parents looking at each other and putting the bike in the trunk of the yellow Mercury and taking me somewhere else, somewhere paved. And then I could do it.

Of all the things I remember from that day, what I remember most is that look my parents exchanged. Those of you more familiar with child psychology than I am could probably describe this much better. But I think it made such an impression because they saw my frustration and yet they couldn't do the frustrating thing for me. I was the one who had to ride that bike. But they could witness the process and influence the outcome simply by watching from the outside.

In a service of loss and remembrance, we think of the people we loved that we have lost. There are a million things we miss: the smell of their hair, the way they routinely drove off with travel mugs of coffee on the roof, their inability to walk past a sofa without plumping up the pillows.

But what is often hard to put into words is that we miss being seen *by* them. They were the ones who remembered us riding that bike on the dirt road. They were the ones who remembered the first time we got a perm, or how hard it was for us to step back when our kids made a bad call, or how shattered we were when we didn't get our dream job way back when, even if it turned out for the best. They are the links to our past, and when we lose them, we become aware of how alone we are. Indeed, we don't necessarily need to have a close and loving relationship with them. So long as they were in the world somewhere, we were remembered. When they die, even if we were estranged from one another, we are more alone.

Today's reading from Isaiah is addressed to the Israelites who are in exile in Babylon. They have lost everything: their land and homes, their livelihoods and way of life, their culture and community. Everything has been broken. And like refugees and prisoners of war everywhere, they are wondering how God could have allowed such a thing to happen. More than that, they are wondering if God remembers the promises God made in the past. They are wondering if God remembers them. They are so alone, because the One who promised to never forget appears to have forgotten.

Into this loss steps the Prophet Isaiah. The first thing he says is, "Remember the Exodus from Egypt?" He 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.* (Isaiah 43:16-17). He says, "Remember when you were slaves in Egypt and you thought God had forgotten you, leaving you there to die toiling away for

Pharaoh? God had not forgotten. God brought you through the sea to the other side, drowning the army that pursued you.”

Now, had anyone who was in Babylon been one of the people who had been a slave in Egypt? No, those events were centuries apart. We were no more exiles in Babylon than they were slaves in Egypt. But we remember the story. We keep a hold of that story and we tell it from time to time, just like we tell the Easter story, we tell the story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah holds up the story of the exodus from Egypt. He gets the broken hearted exiles remembering a time when other people thought God had forgotten them. And then he says, *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.* (Isaiah 43:18) Which seems a little counter-productive, given that he just asked them to remember the Exodus. *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.* (Isaiah 43:19).

Is Isaiah really saying that we should forget our past and just look to the future? We should let go of the memories of the people we loved who are lost to us, who loved us, who remembered our histories. Is he really saying that the sense of aloneness that cuts at us all the time now is something we should just embrace? This new thing will replace the old thing, even though we all know, with every part of us, that nothing and no one can replace those we lost, because those we lost are the ones who remember. Nothing and no one new can give us that sense of being seen in the former times.

Look more closely at what Isaiah is saying. The old exodus was a dry way in the sea; the new exodus will be a wet way in the desert.¹ You need to remember the old exodus to recognize the new. Isaiah is using the old images of the first exodus, the one that all the people in exile in Babylon remember as a sure sign that God did indeed remember them. Isaiah is using the memories of before to help them see the new signs that God still remembers them.

We are in Lent, headed towards Easter. We hold a service of Loss and Remembrance during Lent, because we need to remember those whom we loved and who loved us during this time. There comes a time in the Easter story, when everything is lost, when Jesus of Nazareth is dead and all the promise, all the hope, all the connection is lost. The disciples are alone. Jesus is dead, Jesus, the one who remembered how they came into loving and living relationship with God, is dead. The one who remembered is lost to them. They are alone

And then the empty tomb changes everything. Suddenly a new thing is springing forth. Something new is coming into being. Death itself is dying. The loss itself is dropping away. They are not alone. Christ was with them before and is with them now.

Christ is with us still. But to recognize that Christ is with us, we need to remember the ones we've lost, we need to remember the ones who remembered us. We need to remember what it was like to be witnessed, so we can be the ones to witness others now. We need to be the ones who use those memories to see how God leading us today out of our own exile, out of our own aloneness. Our own experience of remembering and being remembered lets us sense the power that memory offers when it allows us to recognize when something new is springing forth. That power of memory comes from the source of all love. God remembers us always.

¹ Frederick J. Gaiser, "Exodus Redivivus." *Word & World* 33, no. 2 (2013): 109.