

## ***“Remembering and forgetting”***

**March 21, 2010**

*Text: Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14*

### I.

To make it through this life, we have to both remember and forget—and all at the same time. That sounds complicated, if not contradictory. Still, it’s the future to which God calls us.

There are things in life we need to remember. Why? Because they tell us who we are. They’re positive, constructive. They give us a sense of our identity ... our values ... our commitments and life-purpose.

Many of us stand on the shoulders of strong family traditions. We are the products of the sacrifices and commitments, the achievements and successes—the love and affection that was poured into our family over the years—all of which feeds our sense of *memory* about who we are.

But there are also parts of our past that we need to forget, that we are better of *not* remembering. Why? Because they’re too painful and they bring us down. They sour our spirit and diminish our sense of who we are.

Friends, if memory of our past cannot, in some way, make our lives better in the here and now, and on into the future that awaits us, then it’s best *left* forgotten.

### II.

In our reading this morning from Second Isaiah, the prophet is trying to persuade Israel to look towards the future. There is much about the past—particularly the immediate past—that is depressing and discouraging.

The Exile was a prolonged and painful experience. Most of the nation—particularly the middle and upper classes—were deported to Babylon. In the process, they’d lost everything. For Israel, Exile was like having your life hijacked. Suddenly, all that was familiar was gone—taken away through deportation.

With all of his persuasive powers, the prophet is trying to jolt Israel out of any memory of the misery of this past.

*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?*

### III.

A little historical background might be helpful here. The *former things* or *the things of old* the prophet is referring to have to do with the devastating experience of Exile. It would be like all of us, suddenly, being rounded up and sent off to Canada to live. Away from our community life ... away from all that was familiar with no rights or privileges.

The prophetic voices of the Bible would be quick to point out that the Exile didn't happen in a vacuum of meaning. It happened as a consequence of Israel's sin.

In the *big picture* of things, she had forgotten who she was. Increasingly, over the years, she had neglected the poor and, more and more, began to go her own way.

Finally—and this was the last straw—Israel, carelessly, refused to pay tribute (paying tribute has to do with the payments vassal-state nations make to the dominate world power—in this case, Babylon). In any event, Babylon went on the offensive and, over a ten year period—597-587—Jerusalem and Judah were put under siege, bringing about Israel's ultimate destruction.

But Babylon, herself, was no model citizen. And now, more than forty years into exile Cyrus of Persia was on the move and soon his Persian forces would destroy Babylon and a decree would go out that any Israelite who wished could return home to Jerusalem and the land of Judah.

The *new thing* that God is *about to do* is to champion the military campaigns of Cyrus against Babylon. In other words, God is on the move through the person of Cyrus of Persia ... that's the *new thing* that God is doing (At least, this was the interpretation of the biblical writers looking back into history.).

*Don't remember the former things ... I'm about to do a new thing. Don't you see it?*

### IV.

Sometimes there are things about our past—memories—that we simply have to find ways of transcending. We have to move beyond them. Their power to control us and to beat us down—to influence our thinking, utterly depress our spirit, and suck the life out of us is simply too great.

For some people, it might have been an abusive parent as a child ... or a dysfunctional situation in the home around alcohol or substance abuse. For others, it may have been the random fate of misfortune: parents dying young ... or an unstable family situation with regard to income.

For sure, there are things about our past that we need to remember because they have helped to shape us in positive ways; and have helped tell us who we are.

But there are also things we need to forget. They serve only to suck the life and hope out of us and do us no good.

In this sense, the prophet wants his people to *forget the former things* and *don't consider the things of old*. I.e., **What has happened, happened. Forget about it! Let it go! Don't cling to it in any way. That's NOT who you are.**

Going on, the prophet says, *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Again, **change is on the way ... change, hope, new possibilities, a new tomorrow. This is where your future is; give yourself to it!**

The prophet, here, is trying to prepare the way for the Restoration, for the return of Israel from Exile in Babylon.

## V.

What Second Isaiah is arguing for in this reading is a *selective memory* for Israel. Again, **remember the things you need to remember and forget the things you need to forget** (sometimes we need a selective memory). And through it all, keep your eyes on what lies ahead.

Friends, our lives are never perfect. Perfection is an illusion. It doesn't exist for any of us. And we all have parts of our lives that we need to move beyond.

- seasons of our lives when we weren't at our best ...
- times in our lives when, for whatever reason, we got off track ...
- periods of our lives overcome with random events—of misfortune, perhaps, and sadness.

To us all, Isaiah says, **Forget the things you need to forget.**

And on the other side, **lift-up the positive experiences**—the life-enriching memories, the foundational parts of our past that form and feed the core of who we are. In other words: build on the positive.

All of us need to stand tall on the shoulders of the best our past has given us so we can be as alive as possible to the purposes to which God calls us today.

This forgetting, of course, doesn't happen in an instant. It takes time, and often times it requires forgiveness. In the larger sense, it's a process. God is always working in us and through us to take us to a better place of redemption and new life.

## VI.

This was certainly the case for the **Apostle Paul**. His life was an amazing example of life as a process.

In the reading I shared with us from **Philippians**, Paul refers to his remarkable religious journey—a journey that has taken him from a zealous Pharisee and persecutor of the Christian Church, to Christ’s most ardent apostle and defender.

1. Explaining Paul’s life is not an easy task. Put simply, something happened to him ... some new awareness and insight descended upon him. We call it his *conversion*, which is described in Acts 9.
2. Whatever his experience was, he has this empowering sense of Christ’s presence in his life. Somehow, the suffering love of Jesus lives in Paul’s spirit to where he longs to embrace Christ’s suffering in order to make it his own.

How else can Paul say things like, ***I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.***

Paul’s life exudes this sort of passion for the grace of God coming upon us and the love of Christ filling our mind, heart and spirit. It’s this total—overwhelming, really—sense of God’s presence. Paul wants this desperately, for himself, to be sure; but also for us.

And he seeks to embody this in his personal life. As he says in **Philippians**: ***Not that I have already attained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.***

This is how Paul understands Christ’s sacrificial love. But along the way, Paul, too, has to do a lot of selective **remembering and forgetting**.

Going on, he says, ***Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do, FORGETTING what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.***

## VII.

Certainly, Paul—not unlike us—had much to forget and let go of. Again, he’d been a rigorous Jew, and a zealous persecutor of new converts to Christ in the early Church.

But he had much to remember, too—namely, his incredible and life-transforming experiences as an Apostle and the joy and meaning of his new life in Christ.

Our lives are like that: **remembering and forgetting**. Remembering the things we need to remember—the things that form the foundation for our lives. And forgetting what we need to forget: what the prophet Isaiah calls *the former things, the things of old*; and what Paul calls *what lies behind*.

Always, our lives are about this *sorting out* process, a process nurtured by grace and forgiveness along the way—a process of **remembering and forgetting**.

The message for any of us, friends, is that we're not tied to our past. Always, for us Christians, the future is wide open ... and it's a future of being loved, valued and known, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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