

*“Do not remember the former things...”*

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” These are the words of God, as spoken through the prophet Isaiah, that we heard in our Old Testament reading a few moments ago. At one level, they can be among the most devastating works spoken in the Bible for, in just one sentence, an essential part of what makes us human is torn away; our memory.

Human memory is one of the most important, and one of the most complex things about our existence. Countless studies, I’m sure, have been made of human memory, but we still struggle to make sense of how it works. Why do we remember some things, and not others? Why are some memories so much more important than others? And why do we so often have that strange feeling within us when someone or something we’ve long ago forgotten is brought back to mind by a conversation or photograph? Part of the answer, I think, is that our memories help us to understand who we are. They tell us where we have come from; they provide a context for our lives; they explain a lot about us. And in a community, the memories of shared experiences bind us together in ways more important than we can imagine. They are the basis of many of our relationships, and they give us a sense of belonging. So, what’s going on in this reading? Is this really a command to abandon memory?

The corporate memory of the people of Israel was what formed them; it defined them as a particular people. For example, every year they gathered for the Passover festival, and recited the story of their escape from bondage in Egypt, the Exodus. Also, throughout the year, their prayers were formed by the words of the Psalms, imprinted upon their memories by daily repetition, in which they gave thanks to God for the great things he had done for them. And, their children, as they grew, listened to the stories of their heroes: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Sarah, Rachel, Leah and Rebecca; stories of Joshua and David; stories of Deborah and Rahab. They learned about who they were by learning about who their ancestors were, and also about the God who guided and directed their lives. And their memories so connected them with their forebears that the stories of their ancestors became their stories, and the God of their ancestors became their God as well. They could live in the present because they could remember their past.

It’s not so different today. Even though our stories might not be quite so dramatic, nevertheless they have the power to form us, just the same. We learn who we are from our history, from the stories our parents tell us, and from our memory of the things we’ve said and done, and the places we’ve been.

Therefore, it shouldn’t surprise us that the words of God, spoken through the prophet Isaiah, probably came as a shock to the people of God: “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. Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.”

What? What are you saying, God? Throughout our lives, we have faithfully remembered those stories. Our lives have been shaped by them. Our faith was strengthened by them. What is this that you are telling us, God? To abandon our history, to abandon our stories, perhaps even to abandon our faith? How can we worship you without our traditions, how can we worship you without our remembering?

But, you see, the problem was that their faith had become little more than remembering. They had stopped looking for the God of the present, because all their time and energy was given over to remembering the God of the past. They heard about God, but they no longer looked for him. And they had forgotten that their God was not just a God of stories, but also a God of action. They needed to learn to see God in the world around them, and not just in their history and traditions. “I am about to do a new things,” God says. “Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” The God they knew so well from the past, cannot be trapped in their memories. This God has done great things, and will continue to do great things. This God will lead them forward, forward into places that look like deserts, but will suddenly become fertile; into wildernesses full of tamed animals, praising God. The promise is there; are they willing to risk it?

Even though we are not the people of Israel, I wonder sometimes if we don’t face many of the same dangers. Especially we Episcopalians. We have a wonderful tradition that we are right to be proud of. We have a prayer book that is much emulated, which helps us to worship God. We erect buildings that are beautiful, and which remind us of the glory of God and help us live out our lives of faith. And God has blessed us. But we cannot live in the past. We cannot rest on what God *has done*, and turn a blind eye to what God *is doing* now. We need to be willing to turn a critical eye on our traditions; to discern which are anchoring us, and providing stability for us, and which are simply holding us back. We need to be honest about our practices and policies, abandon those which no longer work for us (and, of course, thanking God for working through them in the past), but to focus our time and energies in searching out the ways that God is working in his church and in his world here and now. That kind of self-evaluation can be scary, because I’m talking about letting go of things that are familiar and comfortable, time-tested even, and venturing into new and uncharted territory where the paths are unfamiliar and the terrain is unknown. And who know where we may get lost, or even fail?

Obviously, the natural response to what I’m suggesting is “Why bother? Why give up what we know for something we don’t?” Because, as he said to the people of Israel through Isaiah, sometimes God begins to do a new things. And the reading from Isaiah reminds us that we need to be ready for what God might do; to be looking around, with open eyes; to be looking for the places that might seem like deserts, but are about to reveal springs of fresh water; to look

into the wildernesses, and see new life. And although it doesn't mean losing our memories, it does mean recognizing the difference between the past, the present, and the future; it means that while we may honor what has transpired in the past, we do not allow it to define the limits of our future.

We are fortunate to live in a community that is constantly changing; and I'm thinking not only about Kansas City, and St. Luke's, but also about The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. And I think it's very likely that God is at work in those changes. Our task is to try and figure out where precisely God is leading us; to look beyond the patterns of the past, to the possibilities of the future. And that's a task that God sets before each and every one of us. Where do you see God at work? Where do you think God may be leading us? And what role will you play in all this?

God has done great things for us and our ancestors. And he promises to do as much, if not more, for us and for our descendants. The question is: Are we willing to turn our backs on our old memories, and start making new ones? God's promise is there; are we willing to risk it?