

Remembering Ourselves Anew
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Texts: Isaiah 43:1-21, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Despite a thriving urban economy, beleaguered farmers and laborers are struggling to survive. For most, one injury or illness will spell financial ruin. Judicial systems will “aquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights” (Isaiah 5:22-23). The poor become poorer and the rich become richer; the powerful are like “greedy dogs which can never have enough” and seek only for their own gain (Isaiah 56:11). Those who possess little power are oppressed and exploited by the more influential leaders (Isaiah 10:1-2). Political leaders peddle a religion that worships power and greed, while minimizing and deriding the empathy and grace that God teaches. And then there are mass deportations; families and communities ripped apart by political turmoil. And the threat of war and violence loom over the people. This is the state of the world... in 725 BCE.

History seems to repeat itself, yes? What goes around comes around. We humans keep getting ourselves into these predicaments.

Well, in 740 BCE, God did what God does when the people forget. God sent a prophet. Someone who wasn't afraid to tell the truth even when it wasn't pretty. Someone who was willing to challenge the people who wanted to hear it least and who was willing to offer hope to the people who needed to hear it most. God sent Isaiah.

And Isaiah did what prophets do. Isaiah called the people to task. He pleaded with them to remember God's commandment to live in covenant with God and to love one another too, lest they end up in social and political ruin.

And he also gave them a message of hope. He reminded them of what God had done. “Remember, back in Egypt, the way I parted the sea and then snuffed out the chariots, horses, and armies like a wick? I've got this and I've got you.”

By remembering our communal and personal history with God, we have hope because the people of God have endured hard things before, found their way, and are here today with God's help.

God keeps calling us back. The story of the people of God is one of wandering and homecoming, exile and return, death and resurrection. God keeps bringing new beginnings. And so we remember what God has done.

It does seem weird then that, in this passage, God would tell them to “not remember the former things or consider the things of old” (Isaiah 43:18)... especially right after reminding them about the salvation of the Israelites at the Red Sea. Why would God evoke that memory as a sign of hope and turn around and tell them to forget it?

But, wait. Here's the thing about memories. Whether they are good or bad, they have the tendency to color how we see the future. And sometimes that's good... our traditions keep us centered, our failures help us avoid a repeated pitfall, our successes steer us into ever brighter possibilities. But sometimes it's bad. We can get caught up in the memories, letting our emotions trip us up so we miss a possibility we had not yet imagined. Phrases like, “we've never done it that way before” or “we've always done it this way” slip into our vocabulary. We dig in our heels and want to go back to the remembered past because we know how that worked out. But the past that is remembered doesn't actually exist anymore, so we have to summon the quiet courage to forge ahead to new things, knowing God is at our side.

I wonder if this is what God meant when they urged the Israelites to remember not the things of old. I wonder if, in remembering how things were done in the past, God worried we would limit our imagination of what God can do for us and with us in the future?

I've come to wonder if God's history is not a circle, destined to repeat itself as much as a spiral coming close to the things that remind us where we came from and what we've come through, but ever moving forward into new and unexplored spaces, ever toward the day when all things will be made perfect in the kingdom of God.

Perhaps God was simply saying, “don't get stuck just expecting a repeat of those old things because the new things I'm doing are going to blow that out of the water.” After all, this is the God who created the world, formed the people from the dust, and gave them their holy names. And now, God's doing it again, recreating the world, reanimating the earth that cries in pain, reordering the way all creatures live in harmony once again, and reconciling humans to God. This is the new heaven... not just a return from exile to our earthly home, but a recreation of our heavenly home right here.

What does it look like to remember that God's imagination inspired creation... and wonder about God's recreation here and now with us? What does it look like for us to look with holy imagination at what is possible when we work with God?

God keeps calling us forward. The story of the people of God is one of wandering and homecoming, exile and return, death and resurrection. God keeps bringing new beginnings. So we remember what God has done and remember that God is not done yet.

Isaiah prophesied of the one called Emmanuel, God-with-us (Isaiah 7:14). The Israelites had no idea who this would be, but we do. We look at this passage as resurrection witnesses. We have heard and seen the good news that God was and is with us in Jesus Christ.

And Paul proclaims, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being.” Jesus brought about the kingdom of God and invited us to help make it visible as his body in this world, the church.

The kingdom of God has dawned. You’ve seen it... I know you have. It waits under a layer of grime – of fear, anxiety, injustice, exploitation, and greed – with which the world covers it. But every once in a while, someone rubs away at the hurt, and the bright light of heaven shines through. The person who quietly pays the balance at the grocery store so a family would eat that night. The man at the soup kitchen who sat at the table and talked, and really listened, to tired man’s story. The friend who persists in learning new pronouns and making their friend be seen. The small child who sat next to the old lady in the pew at church who lives alone and thought nobody noticed her. The teenagers who gave up their lunch period to seek out the ones who thought nobody cared and to eat with them.

Imagine if we each rubbed away at it, each in our own spaces, each creating a tiny bit of justice and beloved community, can you imagine how much light could burst forth? Friends, we are re-membered, literally brought into membership with God again and made members, the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ’s body, alive in this world and then sent to uncover the kingdom, the new thing God has done.

God is calling us, an invitation. The story of the people of God is one of wandering and homecoming, exile and return, death and resurrection. God keeps bringing new beginnings. So we remember what God has done, remember that God is not done yet, and re-member ourselves daily into the body of Christ alive and working in this world.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the day Protestant churches remember what Martin Luther began when he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany on October 31, 1517, challenging the practices of the Catholic church, specifically the selling of indulgences. His theses were meant to invite an academic and theological discussion, which they certainly did, and in doing so, changed the landscape of the Church.

It is also All Saint’s Day, the day churches remember the saints who have taught, cared, and nurtured us in our faith and, through their discernment and leadership, shaped what the church is today.

I was struggling how to hold these two important remembrances together and then I realized that it wasn’t that hard at all. See, we are part of a reformed faith, a faith tradition that knows that we must grow and change as new things blossom in this world and that we

must always revisit our practices to make sure they are still faithful to the truth and goodness of God, and we haven't accidentally veered from that path.

Being reformed means holding in one hand the traditions and understandings that have sustained us for generations, the faith of those saints who have nurtured and cared for us, while holding in the other hand the possibility of new things and the flexibility to apply those sustaining traditions to a new and changing world.

So how perfect is it that today we remember the saints and also celebrate the history of the reformed tradition that will continue the faithful conversations of our ancestors as we reform ourselves daily into a faithful body of worship, mission, and service for generations to come.

So, today, I urge you to remember.

Remember the story of the people of God. And remember that the story of the people of God doesn't end on the last page of the Bible. We can read their stories and we can share our own stories... it's a living word that keeps proclaiming God's faithfulness. Remember our traditions, especially the reasons why they feed and nurture us. In our remembering, we find hope that God can do again what God has always done.

And then imagine. Remember our God is a creator, an artist, a composer of holy harmonies. And God's not done. Dream together about how our world could change to be a little bit more like God wants it to be for us. Don't be afraid to dream big. Challenge the status quo. Try the new things. Pull the threads of old traditions forward and make them speak in new languages for today. Lean into holy imagination that doesn't only remember what has been, but remembers what could be.

And then re-member. Re-member the body of Christ, all people everywhere. Build the church. Widen the welcome. Build the bridges. Make peace. Do justice. Do the little things that let the light shine through the mess the world has made of it one ray at a time until God's kingdom comes.

God is calling. God is with you in every new day, in every new beginning. So remember what God has done, kindle a holy imagination about what God might do next, and, as the church together, accept God's invitation to make it so.

Amen.