

Recounting God's Gracious Deeds
Isaiah 63:7-9
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
December 30, 2007
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I read a newspaper article Wednesday about how some people undergo brief bouts of amnesia, which can then raise that person's risk of having a stroke or suffering dementia.

Apparently, some people occasionally suffer brief amnesia that doesn't seem to be caused by a problem in a single region of the brain.

A doctor at Johns Hopkins said she sees such cases about once a month. *It usually is very transient and lasts less than a day, several hours during which people just don't remember what they did or said during that period. Generally, they never do remember that time period,* she said. *I saw someone yesterday who had decorated a tree very nicely, and later that day he came down and said, 'Who decorated the tree?' He couldn't remember doing it at all.*

[*"Temporary Amnesia, Confusion Raise Stroke, Dementia Risk," Washington Post, Wednesday, December 26, 2007*]

I always thought amnesia was pretty much for soap operas. Every soap opera has to have at least one amnesia case every few years. But after reading about this, I started looking around for some articles on the internet about people who really have amnesia.

Reader's Digest has a story from last year about Clive Wearing. Clive Wearing was a musician, a composer, and a renais-

sance music scholar. In March 1985, just 18 months after getting married, Clive was struck down with what is believed to be the most extreme case of amnesia ever.

The herpes simplex virus, which is what causes the common cold sore, had traveled to his brain, wiping out his entire memory center. His brain had swelled, and it had crushed that part of the brain responsible for memory.

So now for Clive Wearing, every conscious moment is like waking up for the first time. Not only is his memory gone, his ability to store new memories is gone as well. His memory is about 7 seconds long, so any new information given to him just melts away.

His wife walks into his hospital room, he springs to his feet and says, *You're gorgeous. I love you.* It's exactly what he says each time he sees her. *Isn't she lovely?* he asks, kissing her hand. Minutes later, when she steps away, he says worriedly, *Somebody told me my wife is here, but I haven't seen her. I haven't seen another human being for 20 years.*

[*"Forget Me Not," Reader's Digest, June 2006*]

Can you imagine? To live with no memory. How hopeless it would be. You might not think so at first, but the truth is that to have no memory is to have no hope. Memory and hope are inextricably connected. Hope, without, memory, is just wishful thinking. It has no roots, no basis in what you know.

I know that Mary Rose Hardin is grateful today, just as all of us are, for her memory. To remember and recount the gracious deeds of the Lord over these last 45 years she has served as, first, pianist then organist for our church.

It was on the last day of the year, 45 years ago in 1962, that Ken and Mary Rose joined this church. Then Mary Rose was pianist for ten years until her arthritis compelled her to switch to the organ. And for all of these years since she's been providing beautiful music for worship and for all of the other special occasions in the history of our church.

And not just providing music but being a person of extraordinary gentleness, kindness, intelligence, and Christ-likeness. I dare you to just try to get Mary Rose to say something bad about someone. It would be like trying to get the guards at Buckingham Palace to smile. It's just not going to happen.

I know that Mary Rose has said that she is surprised at how at peace she is about this decision to retire. And I know that it has a lot to do with memory, with being able to draw on 45 years of the gracious deeds of the Lord. When you have memory like that, you always have hope, because your hope is rooted in what you remember.

Memory and hope.

You know, when times are hard, and there will be those times, you've got to have a place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something—a word, a phrase, a thought, an idea, a person, a memory, a Bible story, something.

As Fred Craddock said one time, talking about memory, it is wonderful for the person who, like a homemaker, when the berries and the fruits and the vegetables are ripe, puts them away in jars and cans in the pantry. Then when the ground is cold and icy and barren and nothing seems alive, she goes to

the pantry and comes back, and it's springtime at her family's table. How blessed is that person.

That's what this scripture is about today—remembering the gracious deeds of the Lord. Not coming up empty when things seem barren around us. If we do not or will not or cannot remember, we will utterly lose our bearings.

And it will, if anything, be worse yet if we fail to remember the right things, the key things, the basic things, the things that let us know what God is like.

Isaiah knew that when he wrote the words of our text, words written not in conditions of security and comfort, but in exile, for the instruction of a people in exile. He said in Isaiah 63:7-9:

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely;' and he became their Savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

I will *recount* it all, said Isaiah. I will tell of it. I will remember it. I will remember it and tell it again, and again. Because especially in exile, especially when the present is hard and the future looks bleak, especially when long years have elapsed and memories fade, it is essential that we not forget. Without recollecting what the Lord has done in days gone by, how could we

know what to anticipate today, or tomorrow? The memory, the recounting, tells us who we are and where we are going.

That's why the amnesia victim I was talking about is so tragic. That's why, to talk about something that more of us have experienced, a victim of Alzheimer's Disease is so tragic.

Imagine: She is in good physical health, and lives solely in a blissful but absolutely meaningless "now." No childhood memories intrude. The picture of her husband on the wall might just as well be that of a stranger. Her conversation is animated but utterly nonsensical.

And while she seems to be able to experience being loved in the moment, the experience is gone as soon as her son's visit ends. That makes her son sad. He wishes she could know that he loves her not only at 2 p.m. when they embrace, but also at 2:05 when he has driven off and, out of sight, is out of mind.

Marguerite Shuster says that sometimes she suspects God feels sad that way about us, especially since, unlike an Alzheimer's patient, we do have the capacity to remember.

If it's terrible when we are not able to do something basic to our humanity like remember, is it not even more terrible when we can but don't?

I suspect God feels sad that we sense his love so intermittently, that we are so inclined to acknowledge it only when we experience it in the present moment, or when we have a pressing need. All relationships depend upon memory; and the Lord slips from our mind so easily.

[Marguerite Shuster, "Recollection," December 8, 1996, "30 Good Minutes"]

So to combat our forgetfulness, to stave off our amnesia, we recount time and time again the gracious deeds of the Lord. Here at Christmas time, how meaningful is it to recount Isaiah's words:

[H]e became their Savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them.

We remember at Christmas that God did not send a messenger; God did not send a proxy. God sent himself, his own presence, in all the vulnerability of a baby.

And we remember, we recount his gracious deeds in that familiar story and those familiar words. Over the last few weeks, once again we remember and recount God's gracious deeds, we remember and recount those words— we know them so well I only have to speak bits and pieces, and you know:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us"

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their sheep at night

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people"

Do we waste our time saying those same words, telling this same story year after year? No. How wonderful and how essential it is that we remember, that we are a people of memory, and we recount, we tell it again and again. Those memories are the building blocks of our hope.

Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor and writer, has a book, *Souls on Fire*, which is a retelling of old Hasidic stories. He begins the book with a tale of the great rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov.

Impatient with the ordeal of the Diaspora, the exile of his day that continues to ours, the Baal Shem longed to force the Creator's hand, as the Jews believed was possible, that he might send the Messiah whom they had awaited so long.

He had tried many times and failed, but this time he seemed to be close to achieving success. Close, but not close enough. He failed once again. For his impudence, for his premature gesture, he and his faithful scribe were deported to a distant, uncharted island, where they were promptly taken prisoners by a band of pirates.

Never before had the great Master been so depressed and resigned. His scribe pleaded with him to do something, say something. But he replied that he could not; his powers were gone. *What about your secret knowledge, your divine gifts? What happened to them?* asked the scribe.

Forgotten, said the Master. Disappeared, vanished. All my knowledge has been taken away; I remember nothing.

Part of his punishment was the loss of his memory.

The rabbi had forgotten, forgotten everything. But when he saw his scribe's despair, he pitied him and tried to find some source of hope.

Don't give up, he said, we still have one chance. You are here, and that is good. For you can save us. There must be one thing I taught you that you remember. Anything ... a parable, a prayer. Anything will do.

Unfortunately, the scribe too had forgotten everything. Like his Master, he was a man without memory.

You really remember nothing, the Master asked again, nothing at all?

Nothing, Master. Except.....except what? ... the aleph, beth. [The Hebrew alphabet, that is.]

Then what are you waiting for? shouted the Master, suddenly excited. *Start reciting! Right now!*

Obedient as always, the scribe proceeded to recite slowly, painfully, the first of the sacred letters which together contain all the mysteries of the entire universe: *Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth...*

And the Master, impatiently, repeated after him: *Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth...*

Then they started all over again, from the beginning. And their voices became stronger and clearer: *Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth...*

[Thanks to Marguerite Shuster for this story]

A, B, C, D... From remembering the basics, all the rest could be rebuilt. They must say them, say them again, say them to one another, say them together, and say them out loud.

Aleph, beth, gimel, daleth. A, B, C, D.

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord.
I will recount all that the Lord has done for us.
I will recount his great goodness to the house of Israel.
I will recount his mercy.
I will tell of the abundance of his steadfast love.
I will remember that he has made us his people.
I will remember that he has saved us.
I will testify to how he was with us, how his own presence saved us.
I will tell of his love and of his pity.
I will proclaim how he lifted us up and carried us in the days of old.

God has delivered us before. He will deliver us again. We say these things again and again. We say them to one another, say them together, and say them aloud.

Recount them. Remember them.

Tell them over and over again, so that neither we nor our children nor our children's children will ever forget the basic, foundational things that give our life meaning.

Aleph, beith, gimmel, daleth. A, B, C, D—the basic memories out of which are fashioned our hope. God has delivered us before. He will deliver us again.

A, B, C, D.

Our memories of God's gracious deeds truly are the alphabet of hope.