

JUST REMEMBER

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November 3, 2019; Non-Lectionary Sermon

Genesis 7:1-5, 17-20; 8:1-4, 13-19; Matthew 7:21-29

***“But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals
and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.
And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided...”***
– Genesis 8:1

President George H.W. Bush liked to tell the story of something that happened to him once, on one of his official visits as President.

That particular day he was touring a nursing home. As the President walked down the hall, trailed by his entourage of aides and reporters, he came upon an old man, who was slowly making his way towards him, leaning heavily on the handrail.

The President reached out, took the patient’s hand, and gently asked him, “Sir, do you know who I am?”

The man stared back blankly, but then his eyes focused. Slowly he shook his head from side to side. “No,” he admitted, “I don’t know who you are. But if you ask the nurses they can tell you.”

It’s a great thing to be remembered.

Imagine what it’s like for a middle-aged person to return to the old high school for a visit. She walks down the old, familiar hallways... Observes the

students and how young they all look... Recalls the faces of her own fellow-students, how they seem to haunt those hallowed halls like ghosts.

But then the visitor turns a corner, and comes upon a familiar face. Why, it's one of her old teachers, that young man right out of college, the one they all liked! Only now he's not so young. His hair has gone gray. He's probably nearing retirement.

The two of them eye each other for a moment, then he smiles with recognition. He speaks her name, that's all.

And that's enough. All she really needed, on that occasion of visiting her old school, was for one person — just one person — to say her name. Someone who remembered her.

How much more important it is to be remembered in a time of difficulty! Too often, in days of illness, or bereavement, or disruption of one sort or another, friends keep their distance. They're afraid they won't know what to say — or if they're bold enough to open their mouths, that the words will tumble out, all clumsy and embarrassing. So they make it easy for themselves. They stay away. The afflicted friend grows lonely and sad.

But then... the phone rings, or a card arrives in the mailbox, or the smartphone pings with a message, or someone from the church shows up with

flowers from the Sunday service. Suddenly, everything's changed. Everything's changed. It's changed because someone remembered.

Today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures tells of one person in desperate straits who has the special joy of being remembered. That person is Noah.

The ark's been built, and loaded up with animals, two of every kind. The rains have fallen, and continue to fall. Every part of the earth, from mountain high to valley low, has been swallowed up by roiling black waves. The only thing remaining is the ark itself, and its precious living cargo.

It's terribly lonely, bobbing there on the waters of chaos. Noah and his little family are fully aware that only the boat's thin skin of cypress wood stands between them and certain death. According to the ancient Hebrew cosmology, the firmament arches high overhead: that protective blue dome we know as the sky. Above the firmament there is water, and below the surface of the earth there is also water. The Lord, angry at human sin, has yanked the protective structure away. The rains cascade down from the heavens. The "fountains" and the "deeps" rise up from below. The dry land has disappeared. All it would take is one great wave to swamp the ark, and turn back the clock of God's creation-experiment fully and completely.

If this is not the Noah's Ark story you remember, I'm not surprised. We get a lot of mileage out of the Noah story as a sweetly beautiful children's tale. We teach it to our kids along with that bouncy little song: "The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky; build it out of mud and barky, barky; children of the Lord."

So popular has the abridged version of this story become, that we forget these chapters of Genesis are really what Bible scholar Phyllis Tribble calls a "text of terror." Maybe these words from chapter 7 — words you'll never see posted on a nursery wall — will remind you of the horrors of universal destruction:

The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days. [7:18-24]

For a time it seems that even Noah may sleep with the fishes. We have this picture of the mighty ark, as huge a vessel as it is, bobbing helplessly on turbulent waters, chased hither and yon by howling winds. God is off wreaking destruction

upon the planet, and seems to have given no further thought to Noah, his little family, and their animal cargo.

But then come words of grace: just three little words. The Bible says, “God remembered Noah.” The Lord does not abandon him to the ocean swells, after all. God closes “the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens” (8:2). And then, a full year after the flood began, the earth is dry once again: dry enough to bear the weight of human feet.

The wonder of it all is this: the great Creator God, the one who fashioned space and time out of nothing, is yet able to remember individuals. That’s a remarkable claim. Noah and his family are not alone. *We* are not alone.

There may well come times, in our lives, when storms and floods descend. In a desperate hour, you and I may feel as though we’re bobbing on the waves, floating on chaos itself.

God’s solution, in such a dark hour, is not what you or I are typically inclined to ask for. God offers those who are “at sea” not so much a spectacular rescue, but rather a slow and steady process of the waters’ subsiding. Through it all, God remembers us. And with that remembering comes the promise of new life.

One of the joys of getting to know my sister-in-law-Erika, years ago — wife

to my brother Jim — has been getting to know her family: especially Erika's brother Norm and his wife Fran. That side of the family, our Boston and New York in-laws, are Jewish.

I learned something in a very moving way from Norm's wife Fran a couple years ago: something about the soul-strengthening power of remembrance.

I'd always known Fran's parents had immigrated from Austria just before World War 2. What I didn't know was that not all her relatives made that journey. Her grandfather and her aunt stayed behind, and perished — along with nearly everyone from their Vienna neighborhood — in the Nazi Holocaust.

The Austrians have been doing a very significant thing in recent years, as a way of commemorating what happened in those terrible days. The Nazis kept very good records of the people who died in the camps, and where they'd lived at the time of their arrest. What happened in the Jewish neighborhoods, once they'd been swept clean of human inhabitants, was that others moved into the houses. New deeds were issued. Children were born and grew up. New stories were created, by families with little awareness of the rich stories that had preceded them in those very houses.

The Austrian government, these days, is making certain those stories are not utterly forgotten. They've taken the names of those former inhabitants and

engraved them into metal plaques, that they've set into the sidewalk pavement or mounted on the sides of the houses themselves.

Fran — the sister-in-law of my sister-in-law — took a trip to Vienna a couple years ago, a pilgrimage of sorts. She went to the neighborhood where her parents had once lived. She went there because she'd learned from the Austrian government that a plaque had been set into the sidewalk outside the old family house. The plaque bore the names of her grandfather and her aunt, and below it the year of their murder: 1942.

Fran found it incredibly meaningful to see that plaque for herself: to read the names of two relatives she'd never met, but names she'd always known; to bend down and touch it, to run her fingers over the lettering: a solid, material reminder of two lives that until that day had seemed to vanish, becoming insubstantial, a wisp of smoke on the breeze.

It is a powerful thing to have such a physical reminder: to remember: and to be remembered.

There was a time when Jesus asked to be remembered. He was riding his own personal waters of chaos at the time. Standing before his disciples in the Upper Room, he takes the bread and blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them:

“Do this, remembering me.”

Remember him, we do. We remember him on the cross, remember him in his agony, remember him even in his godforsakenness. This is what we do, as Christians, each time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Jesus, son of the God who remembers us, we remember.

And in that remembrance, we find our way back home.

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