A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*A Habit of Remembering*”

Psalm 81; Jeremiah 2

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What is your strategy for helping you remember to do things? You know, all the things—to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home, to pick up your child from school, to pay the bill on time this month, your anniversary, your paper due date, replace the air filters, change the oil . . . all the things we have to hold in our brains. What’s your strategy? Tie a string around your finger, keep a to-do list on a sheet of paper? Calendar on the fridge? Reminders on the phone. Trust your brain to remember?

I’m sure you’ve figured out. What about the other things, the bigger ones—like remembering who you are, remembering your purpose, your identity, your God. What about those things. How do you live without forgetting those?

The biblical witness to the world is of a Creator God who is active and present in the lives of men and women. God is moving them, redeeming them, teaching and leading them, and pursuing the best for them. And yet they keep forgetting who God is and who they were made to be. This irony is at the heart of the relationship between God and God’s human creatures. They are created to live in relationship with God, and sometimes they do, but sometimes they turn away and go off on their own.

This is the biblical story. And it’s the story of our lives too.

It’s speaking into this reality that Psalm 81 gives a straightforward and simple reminder: “I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” I think it’s the only time in the psalms this reminder is given, but it may be familiar to you. If it is, it’s because you’ve heard it over and over and over again all through the scriptures. It’s the opening line of the 10 commandments. It’s repeated over and over through Leviticus. The roots go all the way to Genesis where God says to Abraham: I am the Lord who brought you from the land of Ur. Two generations later, to Jacob, “I am the Lord your God, the God of your fathers Abraham and Isaac.” To Moses, the same, “I am the Lord your God. . . “

Over and over this simple, repeated, reminder builds through Scripture: I am the Lord.

God is reminding them what they forget. Your life is God’s gift. God’s desire is for you. Your identity is enfolded in God’s good grace. It’s who you are, who you were made to be. Did you forget again?

We forget: we are creatures not the creator; we are beloved and made to love; we are kin with one another and all creatures sharing our common home; we are given the gift of life, and love, both life and love filled and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. We are made to be connected, to breathe in the spirit and breath out mercy. We are made for a purpose. You matter; you are part of something bigger and better than yourself because you’re made in the image of God as part of a world made for the glory of God. Every day you live, the task is no greater and no less than this: to be who you were made to be in the image of God.

We forget. We forget God. We forget we are not gods. We forget what God has done. We forget that we are not alone. We forget who we are made to be and we forget just how dynamic it is to walk around in a normal, ordinary day immersed in the presence and goodness of God’s love, shining like the sun, like Thomas Merton once said. We become isolated, self-centered, self-serving, lonely, aimless people. We become like the character in Jesus’ parable: we enter a room and think we must be the most important person in the room because, really, deep down, having lost a vision for who we are and whose we are and who others are in God, we might as well really the only person in the room. It’s all about me. It’s a terribly lonely place to be.

To people who have a habit of forgetting, over and over God says remember. Remember who I am. Remember what I have done. Remember your first journeys in life; remember when I delivered you from your darkness; remember when I gave you manna in your wilderness. Remember when the Spirit guided your heart and mind. Remember the covenant. Remember those times in life when you felt close to me. It’s still who you are. I have not forgotten you.

Remember who you are. This isn’t extra credit in spiritual maturity. This is what it’s all about. This isn’t the trim; this is the foundation; this is what matters most of all. And I think that’s at the root of why this phrase is repeated so often in scripture, “I am the Lord your God. Remember.

To remember is not merely to recall facts from the past, like a student memorizing dates for a history test. That’s a mental exercise and has value in it. Much of what we gain from reading Old Testament stories is simply the pleasure and importance of retelling history. It’s like at a family reunion when the same stories are told time after time. There’s pleasure in recounting what has happened in the past. But there’s more. Something wonderful and mysterious happens when you’re a part of retelling what happened back then in past generations and in your own life. It begins to shape who you are now. That’s what it means to remember. It’s remembering and becoming who you are.

I’ve been chastised resoundingly at home recently for not wanting to go see the new Lion King movie. I like Lion King. I’m all for it. I’ve just, for now, reached peak Lion King. Seen the old movie, owned the soundtrack, been to the show at Disney. And now a sermon illustration. I think I win lion king bingo.

The whole story revolves around this premise—forgetting and remembering. I think that’s why it connects so deeply. Simba, the lion, forgets who he is, the King of the Jungle. After a tragedy, he turns away from his identity in shame and fear, and then in the sloth of a problem-free philosophy of a life vacation. He forgets who he really is until an old friend challenges him and a wise prophet leads him to the place where he can face his shame and his fears. There he hears a voice from James Earl Mufasa Jones. You with me? Remember when the spirit of his father spoke to him? “Simba, you have forgotten who you are and so you have forgotten me. You are more than what you have become.”

Powerful words. Painful but powerful. Remember.

The prophet Jeremiah, like Mufasa, growls the same challenge to people who have the same problem. Remember who you are. You have forgotten. Jeremiah says: *Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.* Powerful words. Painful but powerful.

A fountain of living water; God’s ever-giving life flowing as a spring of sweet water. God’s fecundity, as Bonaventure describes it, is God’s life continually pouring forth creative love. This fountain is for our sustenance and our renewal; God is a fountain of life-giving water in the desert. Drink deeply.

But we turn away, for whatever reasons, shame, pride, fear. We dig cisterns for ourselves and of ourselves, little reservoirs to catch and hold a little water for our little lives. We trade a fountain of flowing water to make little cisterns of ourselves, but we don’t even do that well. This is the judgment: You’ve traded a fountain of living water for a cracked cistern that can hold no water. This vivid, painful, powerful image is laid there at our feet. How bizarre that we do this. How tragic.

If this describes us in any way, no wonder we feel empty and lost. Sometimes I feel empty, spiritually parched if I’m not drinking deeply and daily from the waters of life. If I try to go on my own power, I soon feel the dryness in my spirit, like the well has run dry, like the cistern is indeed empty.

In Assisi, Italy, this summer, I picked up a sandwich, a drink, a couple of peaches and a book, put on my backpack and set out to walk down the wooded, unpopulated side of the hill which Assisi crowns. I wanted to be out in nature, and I’d read that at the bottom runs a creek. I had a glorious vision that I would take my lunch and my book, find a tree down by the river and snack and read until I fell asleep by the flowing water. What a glorious afternoon I had in mind. I set out on the walk, and it was hot that day. Baking hot. I couldn’t wait to get to the river, even though I knew every step that took me down there meant another step I’d have to climb to get back up to the town. Imagine what I felt when I arrived at the river to find only a dry river bed. Completely dry, not a drop in it. No relief to be found there. No source of life. No renewal. No afternoon nap. O the humanity!

Some days I feel like that river. Like there’s nothing left in here. On those days, the one thing I know for sure is that I’m trying to drink not out of the river of life, from the spring of living waters, but I’m trying to survive on my own source of strength, my own self. I might be saying all the right words, and doing some of the right things, but if I’m not drinking from the fountain daily, I’m a dry river bed. And so are you, I suspect.

But when I’m drinking from the fountain, the fount of every blessing, my heart is much more tuned to sing God’s praise. My eyes are opened to divine goodness shining all around me, my ears unstop to hear God’s words of compassion and calling, and I’m much more the person I was made to be in relationship with God and those around me. We must remember to live in the Living God. When we don’t, our lives spiral into all sorts of things. It’s the root of despair, hopelessness, hatred, violence.

Remembering can be not actually remembering. That was Simba’s situation. He had spent years out doing his own thing, serving himself and his own desires and needs, all the while he actually, literally could recollect the life he had and the purpose he was to serve, but he was severed that past. His mind could recall but his body and soul were not there anymore. To remember is not just to reminisce but to live in the reality of who you are. Simba even protested when told he’d forgotten who he was, he said, “No, how could I?” Of course, he could recollect, but the recollection was a source of shame, not hope--of pain, not identity. What he had to learn to reclaim was that who he once was, he still was to be. If the gap could be bridged, it was time for the water to flow again in the river of his life.

The Lion King story doesn’t speak overtly of grace, but this is grace: being reminded, even when we are challenged to remember who we are. Being welcomed back home and being shown the path to get there. Grace is the weekly sabbath reminder to learn to be still and know that I am God. Grace is the daily reminder that God is to be praised from the rising of the sun to its setting. Grace is the Holy Spirit descending like a dove that we may be renewed. Grace is broken bread and red-stained chalice, and knowing again that you are fed the bread of life and the cup of salvation; that He who was whole was broken that we who are broken can be made whole.

When we come to communion, we usually rehearse the words Jesus said when he took the bread and the cup with his friends on the night of his betrayal, saying to them, “Do this in remembrance of me.” You’ve heard that before. “Do this in remembrance of me.” Some churches, many churches, have an altar table with those words carved into them. Powerful words, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Certainly, it means to recollect the source of our life and faith in what happened at the cross and the tomb. This is the source of our salvation, rooted in historical events. We have faith in who Jesus was and what Jesus did. It all hangs on that. On the night he was betrayed, as the cross loomed, he broke bread and poured wine as a sign of his body to be broken and blood to be shed. The disciples didn’t understand everything that night. How could they? But they would understand soon and never forget. From those days until now, Christians gather at the table to break the bread and pour the wine, doing these things in remembrance of him.

As we do, we do more than re-enact past events. When we do this in remembrance of him, we enter into the story. We are part of it, and it becomes part of us. We are not just recollecting what Christ did, we are participating in what Christ is doing. We’re not just thinking about what the disciples did, we’re being formed as disciples of our living Lord. Every time we break bread together, we participate in Christ’s grace. Every time we share our lives with others, He is here. To borrow Jeremiah’s image, we’re drinking from the fountain of divine love and grace that flows all around us, through us, over us, washing us, cleaning us, renewing us until we become part of the river.

There is spiritual energy—electricity-- you feel when you’re part of this. When you worship with your brothers and sisters, you’re not playing at religion, you’re being fed. When you take the bread and cup, you’re not just dutifully fulfilling an obligation to reenact an ancient meal, you’re part of God’s life now. It’s true at the Table, the electricity, the spirit, the wonder of it all, anywhere and everywhere the material world is infused with the Spirit. The church word for this is sacrament. It’s at the Table and everywhere Christians share their food and share their lives with friend and stranger; it’s at the Baptistry and everywhere lives are transformed for good; and you’ve felt that electricity running through you in other ways too: those times when your soul feels at home in your body. When you feel like you’re right where you’re supposed to be. You’re remembering who you are with your mind, your heart, your being.

It’s sacramental. God is here.

So this is the invitation we are given: to remember the Lord you God who brought Abraham to his new life, who brought Jacob to his new family, who brought Israel from slavery to their new land, who brought the people back from their sin and their exile; to remember the Lord your God whose Son was born into this world, who lived and loved and taught and shared life, and then was arrested and crucified by Pontius Pilate, who was buried and three days rose again. Remember the Lord your God whose Spirit is gifted to us, who gave us church, and Table, and purpose, and who promises life everlasting. And who is with us now, here in this place and will never leave you nor forsake you.

Drink from the waters of life. Come, drink freely, drink deeply, drink every day, drink always. Let the river of life flow through you, through your mind, through your words, through your heart, through your hands and feet, as you become a channel of blessing in your God, the well-spring of Life.

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