

Nostalgia

July 16, 2023 Sermon

2 Samuel 23:15-17

I was preaching about America on July 2, and showing that in every aspect of life we should want to be better, improve. I ended up cutting the final paragraph, about “the good old days,” but I’ll quote it now. I said, “I actually like nostalgia. Some things really were better in the good old days. Popcorn and pizza, to name two. Baseball. Movies. One Sunday I’ll devote a sermon to it,” I warned. Fair enough. I didn’t want to confuse you then by looking back in a sermon about looking ahead. But today is the day for looking back. For nostalgia.

Our Bible story for today is bittersweet. And quite instructive. King David is growing old, he’s in another war with his lifelong enemy, the Philistines. The Philistines have even conquered David’s hometown, Bethlehem. Poor King David is outside of town, humiliated. Hidden with his best soldiers, in a cave, looking at his defeated hometown, he’s suddenly filled with nostalgia. He exclaims, “Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a cup of water from the well near the gate...in Bethlehem.” One translation puts it, “oh, for a cup of water from home.”

I bet you know that feeling. My father grew up in rural Maine, and his childhood favorite drink was Moxie, the world’s strongest tasting soft drink. You really have to have moxie to even drink Moxie. My father moved to New York City, became a true New Yorker. But when he hit his 50’s, 60’s, 80’s, 90’s, nothing made him happier than to open a 6-pack of Moxie under his Christmas tree. Why? I mean, it really is awful tasting. But it made him remember – nostalgic – for walking across the bridge, over the Androscoqsin River in Mechanic Falls, on a summer afternoon after playing baseball for the old town team in the Pine Tree

League. That's a whole lot of nostalgia in one paragraph, that means nothing to you, but I'm sure you can match it from your own life.

I'm going to take you on a trip down "memory lane" for the sole purpose of jumpstarting your own memories of your own "good old days." I grew up on the streets of Queens, the Richmond Hill, Woodhaven section, best pizza ever. As an adult, I became pastor of a church in Forest Hills, just a couple of miles from Richmond Hill. My kids will tell you, I dragged them on many a school night back to Richmond Hill, going from pizza place to pizza place, up and down Jamaica Avenue, Woodhaven Boulevard, trying to match that best pizza ever. Never found it.

I recently read about the best restaurants in Manhattan, where a top-selling dessert is "molten lava cake," a rich chocolate cake with melted chocolate pudding inside. These high-end, first-class, from scratch Kitchens admitted – they use chocolate pudding from a mix, like the "My-T-Fine" boxed mix of my day. Why? Because people want the taste that they remember, and they remember chocolate pudding from a mix. For decades our family went to Maine in the summer, where anything that can be made with blueberries IS made with blueberries, and the water temperature is 55 degrees if you're lucky, and there are bugs everywhere. Why do people still go there? Because that's what summers are for: blueberries, water at 55 degrees, and bugs everywhere.

As I waited in my doctor's office this week, I admired a simple sort of sketched painting on the wall – of a Good Humor Truck. Seriously, I could taste the ice cream and hear the Good Humor bell ringing. Oh my, the list of nostalgia goes on: DooWop music, "Film Noir," popcorn popped in Crisco oil, covered in butter just off the stove, generous with the salt, not even trying to be a health food. Or this teenager's perfect Saturday. Take the subway, the El, into Times Square, eat at Horn and Hardart Automat, mosey on down to Greenwich Village at night, hit the old folk music coffee house clubs, then wander the San Gennaro Festival for sausage and peppers, gambling, and intrigue. And if I've succeeded, you've already recalled your best ice cream at where? Your favorite summer

vacation place? The first pop concert you attended? Snuggling under the blanket with a flashlight to read. A certain meatloaf, or apple pie or TV show or an egg cream...like nothing since. The good old days. The good old ways. Nostalgia.

The challenge, of course, is what do we do with our nostalgia, what's it for? Our Bible story is instructive. Old King David whines out loud, or laments or gives one of those big, showy, "please help me" sighs, saying "Oh, how I'd love a cup of water from the old well where my dear mother used to fetch me water every day!!" Turns out that Kind David is hiding in a cave with 30 of his best soldiers, part of a group known as "David's Mighty Men." Three of them immediately jump up, head off in the darkness, sneak through enemy lines, grab some water, hurry it back to thirsty King David – who, surprisingly, is ashamed, ashamed that he put his friends at risk just for some selfish, nostalgic whim. So "he pours it out on the ground." Which leads me to ask:

What's the purpose of nostalgia? And what's the cost if we're not careful? What's worth remembering? What's worth retaining? What's worth honoring? Every aspect of society wrestles with these questions. Have you ever lived in a town or city that went through "urban renewal?" What gets kept? What gets torn down? Remember when Coca-Cola tried to redo its formula? OR the current "Bud Light" drama, when the beer company sent a free beer to a trans influencer which the influencer sent viral creating a huge backlash and boycott of Bud Light, sending sales plummeting. So, Budweiser did what? They cranked out new commercials featuring...the ever-popular, non-controversial, nostalgic-from-the-good old days Clydesdale horses, romping through the scenic vistas. There is a constant tug 'o war between past and present, now and then, and even between the past as we want to remember it, and the past as it was. Remember my example of loving Maine for its 55-degree water, bugs, and blueberries? Truth is, they're just the backdrop to all those memories we made, and we treasure. It's family memories and fun memories that capture us, of lakeside cottages, mountain hikes, lobster boats and fudge. Strolling Kennebunkport, ocean walks and swims, parents, grandparents...kids and a friend or two from home all sitting by the fireplace on cool evenings.

Remembering is fun...and inspiring. Our Christian faith is built on memory, shared memory, of the nostalgic kind, like our Christmas Eve services; and the more monumental kind, like Holy Communion and Easter's Resurrection. Old and New Testaments both, our Jewish roots and our Christian religion equally call us to remember. In the Old Testament, God is clearly situated in history, and telling us to remember that history, all of it, good and bad, and learn from it.

The whole Passover meal among Jewish people is a meal of remembrance. Each morsel of food, each sip of wine directly linked to God's salvation of the Israelites. They eat bitter radishes and salt water and a muddy looking fruit dish, to remind them of the bitter tears of slave work. They take sips of wine to remember God's promises that got them through. They eat matzoh flatbread crackers to remember the fraught urgency of escape. They remember and remember and remember, the good and the bad, the better to rejoice in today.

When we come to the New Testament, Jesus concludes his earthly, human life with one "last supper," remember? And remember what he said about it? After washing the disciples' feet, after praying for unity, after warning of betrayal, after giving the disciples the symbolic bread and wine of his own deathly sacrifice on the cross, after establishing the Holy Communion/Eucharist ritual we've relived ever since, Jesus gave only one restriction, one requirement: "Do this IN REMEMBRANCE...In Remembrance of me." Jesus is inviting us to a trip down memory lane, to a very unique spiritual nostalgia, an exercise in constructive remembrance.

But remembrance is tricky if we abuse it. At The Last Supper, Jesus is preparing to die, he gives the disciples the bread of his flesh and the wine of his blood to graphically underscore his sacrifice and then he, Jesus, says directly: "Do this in remembrance of me." And yet, 2/3 of Christians, Protestants and Catholics, have overruled Jesus, corrected him, say, "uh, uh, that's not enough. You have to be old enough. You have to go to the right church. You have to be baptized, confirmed, belong to the right church. You can't be divorced, gay, or some other

“fill in the blank.” Lots of Christians twisted nostalgia into a litmus test, which was NOT Jesus’ idea.

America’s current reckoning with slavery is a case in point. Take Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello, and many other stately plantation homes across America. Are they architectural gems, with manicured lawns and picturesque landscaping evoking a genteel lifestyle of a long-ago era? OR the literal headquarters of the slave industry, a place of unimaginable horror? OR both? And are we mature enough to remember both? Going back to Jesus’ admonition about himself and us, to “do this in remembrance of me!”, remember what? The good times? Only the good times?

I’ve always wanted to wear a cross, not a big one, like a lot of clergy do, especially on Sundays, and I understand especially the ceremonial part of that, a big cross, worn outside, on Sunday while up front, leading worship. But I’m not talking about that. I’ve always wanted a nice, small, silver cross, to wear around my neck daily, a plain, simple silver cross. I never get around to it, but if I did, I’d get two: one a crucifix, with the body of Christ on it, a symbol of his crucifixion; one empty, like our altar cross, no body, a symbol of resurrection. Then I’d alternate wearing them, day by day. I’d be remembering, as Jesus said, honoring the past, the bad times of Good Friday and Crucifixion; and remembering the good times of Easter and Resurrection.

Here's an admission you don't get often. I hit a dead end with this sermon, Friday morning. I wrote the first opening five minutes of it, up through the pizza and popcorn nostalgia, and then hit a roadblock. For hours. I’m sitting at my desk, pen in hand, drinking coffee and getting nowhere. So, I asked Alida for help. I read her the opening, the intro, laying the groundwork for somewhat silly stories of nostalgia. And then I asked Alida, “now what?” Right away she said, “Faith, built on memory, shared memory.” Remember when I said that a few minutes ago? Straight from Alida. Then she said, and I really love this, you can forget this whole sermon if you remember this one sentence, she said, “We’re supposed to remember, remembering is good. We need to discern the patterns of God’s

interactions with us.” That’s spiritual nostalgia. That’s faithful remembering: “discerning the patterns of God’s interactions with us.”

That’s why I had us sing today’s opening hymn, “Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear, things I would ask him to tell me if he were here. Scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea, stories of Jesus, tell them to me.” Why that hymn? Because for me it captures all those moments in my life when I felt embraced by God, strengthened, comforted, saved, led, inspired.

From early childhood to this very morning, through all of life’s crises and adventures, in moments of doubt or fear or failure, some little church was the right place for me, at the right time, in the right way, “helping me to discern the patterns of God’s interactions with me.”

Helping me to remember.

Thank God.