

“The Hardest Commandment in the Bible” April 3, 2022
Isaiah 43:16-21 Westminster, Greenville
5th Sunday in Lent Ben Dorr

Were any of you at the 11:15a service two Sundays ago?

If you were, and if you stayed until the end of worship, you saw something happen to me that had never happened before, when I was saying the charge at the end of worship....

Go out into God’s world in peace, have courage....and my mind went BLANK! I’ve said that charge for over 20 years at the end of worship, I have heard that charge since I was boy sitting in the pew in worship, never once had I forgotten the words to that charge...and for whatever reason, at that moment two weeks ago, I could not remember the next phrase.

So what did I do?

I was tempted to fake a coughing fit, pretend like something was caught in my throat...but I decided against it.

And I decided to just start over.

And when I started over, I didn’t TRY to remember.

I just started again, hoped it would come to me, let it come, and it did: Go out into God’s world in peace, have courage, hold on to what is good...yes, that’s the phrase I forgot.

Next time that happens, if it happens again, feel free to just start saying it in my place, and I’ll pick it up with you!

I’m beginning this morning with what happened two weeks ago because it deals with our subject for today’s worship.

Our subject today is memory.
 The necessity of memory.
 The power of memory.
 The most faithful ways that you and I can use your memory.

That is the subject, so let me begin by reminding you—you know this, but I'll remind you anyway:

The Bible knows all about the importance of memory.

Jesus breaks bread with his disciples on the last night of his life.
 And what does he tell them?

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Or take the Ten Commandments.
 How many of you recall the 4th commandment?

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy...” (Exodus 20.8)
“Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out...” (Deuteronomy 5:15)

And not just in scripture.
 In the 16th century, it was the English poet John Donne who once said that NOT the mind and NOT the will BUT THE MEMORY is the shortest and surest way to God.

Memory is at the heart of faith.
 It is central. It is pivotal.
 And yet did you hear our Old Testament text for today?
 It was the prophet Isaiah, telling the people of Israel to do what?
 Do not remember!

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

This is, perhaps, the hardest commandment in the Bible.
Do not remember??!

Why in the world would Isaiah tell the Israelites that God is now asking them—no, not asking, commanding them—not to remember?

I don't know for sure, but I'd like to take a guess.

Do you mind if I take a guess?

My guess is this:

There are times when memory—

as important as it is, as powerful as it is—

it gets in the way.

Do you know what I mean?

A number of years ago, I read something about women who were members of symphony orchestras, and the obstacles they had to overcome to get into an orchestra. It used to be that auditions for symphony orchestras would take place without screens. So the listeners, the judges, would both hear AND see who was auditioning. But then through the hard work of some courageous pioneers, screens were instituted.

As the writer Malcolm Gladwell describes it in his bestselling book, *Blink*, this made all the difference in the world for women musicians. For example, Julie Landsman auditioned for the role of principal French Horn at the Met in New York way back in 1985.

“At the time, there were no women in the brass section of the orchestra,” Gladwell writes, “because everyone ‘knew’ that women could not play the horn as well as men.”

But Landsman played, and played very well. She nailed her audition, and even held onto a high C at the very end of her piece to delight the judges...who, of course, could not see who was playing.

And when she stepped out from behind the screen—the judges GASPED.

Not just because she was a woman—but also because they *KNEW* her. She had subbed for the Met before, and they had no idea she was so good, because they had spent years listening with...what?

Their eyes, yes, listening with their eyes.
But also listening with their memory.

Because they had no memory of a woman holding a permanent position in the brass section of a symphony orchestra at the Met, they could not imagine a woman winning the audition for a symphony orchestra at the Met.¹

Do you see how it works?
Do you see how sometimes, in particular situations, our memory gets in the way?

It’s not just something that can occur in orchestras.
It’s something that happens in church.

We remember one way of doing things.
And so we assume...that’s just the way we’re always going to do things.

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 2005.

It happened when I first came to Westminster.
 In the churches that I had previously served, we would typically have a handful of baptisms every year.

So my previous habit was to meet individually with each family.
 Spend 20 minutes in my office, explaining the theology behind baptism in our denomination, and what would happen during the liturgy.

When I came here, I had that model in mind.
 It had not dawned on me what it would mean that we have baptisms ALMOST every Sunday here at Westminster.

So early on, I was about to schedule one of those one-on-one meetings in the church office, talking with Michelle—when Leigh overheard, and she strongly advised that I ought not to do that.

Because if I did it with one family, I'd be doing it with all families, and with all the baptisms around here, I wouldn't have time to do anything else!

Baptism classes were definitely the way to go.
 Even though I had never done it that way before.

You know what the famous “last words of the church” are, right?
We've never done it that way before.

So my question for all of us today is this:

At Westminster, how should memory guide us?
 What is the most faithful use of memory?
 Because there are definitely times when memory should guide us.
 Never mind, for a moment, what Isaiah said to us today.

When we celebrate a baptism, what are we invited to do?
Remember your baptism, as we celebrate this sacrament.
In other words, remember who and whose you are...

What anniversary are we celebrating at Westminster this year?
75th...good, glad you remembered!

Now why do we do it?
Not just because it's a fun thing to do, celebrate, throw a party, all that...

We do it because all of us here today are drinking from wells we did not dig.

Show of hands—how many of you here today have experienced, in some way, perhaps even a life-changing way, the love of God at this church?

Yes, right.
Is that love you received—something you planned for yourself, did for yourself, worked for yourself, and gave to yourself?

No, of course not.

We celebrate our 75th anniversary to remember those who came before us and created this space and shaped and led this community so that God's love could be known in this place today.

Do you see?

We have to make room for memory in order to be a faithful church. I do not believe Isaiah is telling us today—get rid of your past, get rid of your memories.

Isaiah is asking a different question:

How?

How will we use our memories in a faithful way?

Look again at the text.

Right before he tells the Israelites, “Do not remember...”—Isaiah appeals to their memory!

“Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick...”

What’s that in reference to?

Do you remember?

It’s a reference to the exodus from Egypt.

Isaiah calls to mind, and asks the Israelites, to remember the exodus—AND THEN he says: Do not remember!

What’s that mean?

Is Isaiah waffling? No, no...I think it means this.

Remember that God once saved you, and God will do it again.

It may not look like it looked in the past.

God is going to do a NEW thing, will love you in a NEW way...

Do not put limits on HOW God will show up.

Just trust that God will show up.

THAT would be a faithful use of memory...

Not just for the Israelites of old.

But for all of us today.

Let me get at it like this.

I heard an interview recently given by Chris Wallace, the former Fox News anchor, two-time host of the Presidential debates, and son of the famous 60 Minutes news reporter, Mike Wallace.

Chris Wallace spoke about how his relationship with his father, in the early years of his life, was difficult.

How his father wasn't there for him.

How Mike Wallace's job with CBS always came first.

It meant that Mike Wallace was very successful professionally, but personally, he went through multiple divorces, and he didn't have the best relationship with his son, Chris.

But Chris Wallace recalls how, when he went through his own divorce years later, his father started to check in on him. Not once a month, not once a week.

He called him every day.

He did this for 20 years, the last 20 years of Mike Wallace's life...he called his son.

And because of those phone calls, their relationship changed.

Now, how does Chris Wallace remember his father?

As someone who was absent for a long period of time in his life, yes.

But also as someone who changed his ways.

Who was there for him.

And here's what stands out for me—Chris Wallace did not let his memories of how his father had been absent in the past PREVENT him from growing in his relationship with his father during the last two decades of Mike Wallace's life.²

Now...if that can be true for Chris Wallace's relationship with his dad, how much more so, in our relationship with God?

After all, God is not an absent father or mother or parent.
God is the one who is with us in all the changes that life brings.

How many of you know where the Charter Room is in our church?
How many of you know there's a plaque outside the door to the Charter Room with the list of names of the people who helped found this church?

Now I never had the opportunity to meet those people.
But sometimes, I just stand in the hallway and read their names.
Why?

Because if not for what they did, and if not for what God did through them, none of us would be here today...what's amazing to me about what our charter members did, is that they had no guarantees.

When they were worshipping in the tent, before they ever had a sanctuary, they did not know that it was all going to work out.

But they trusted their memories of God's presence in their past.

² As heard on the podcast "Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard," [Chris Wallace — Armchair Expert \(armchairexpertpod.com\)](https://www.armchairexpertpod.com).

And relying on those memories, they believed that God would be with them in the future.

Not necessarily in the same ways, but in new ways.

**Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am doing a new thing.**

Do you believe God still does new things?

I do...

So let me invite you today to go home and remember.

Remember how God has been with you, loving you, walking with you in the past.

And then—do like those charter members did years ago.

Trust in the goodness and grace of God,
even when God,
especially when God,
is doing something NEW....

(Amen.)