

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Next week is Palm Sunday already!

If we have accomplished anything in our weeks together in this Lenten season, I hope that we have at least encouraged each other to **notice and reflect** more on how big and all-encompassing God's love is - for us and for the world.

Today, the Word will stimulate our senses, will give us incredible visuals, and will remind us that God has given us some important tools that are helps in this work of noticing and reflecting: **memory and imagination**.

Listen to what has been said about these tools by some famous people.

Memory... is the diary that we all carry about with us. - Oscar Wilde

The true art of memory is the art of attention. - Samuel Johnson

Imagination is more important than knowledge. - Albert Einstein

Imagination is the beginning of creation. - George Bernard Shaw

Our Isaiah text today starts out with the prophet stirring the *people* of Israel's memory, and it sounds like he's wanting them to remember the Exodus, one of the most momentous experiences in Ancient Israel's life.

In that experience, God had seen the Israelites' suffering in Egypt, and had provided a prophet and a leader - Moses - to bring them out of slavery to freedom. Time after time, God had made a way when there seemed to be no way.

Isaiah reminds them in picturesque language what God had done then - how he had made a road for them right through the water, how he had

carved a path through pounding waves, how he had summoned the Egyptian horses and chariots and then had snuffed them out like so many candles. What a reminder of God's love and compassion for them.

But the Exodus experience had happened - **not** to the Israelites Isaiah is talking to - but **to their ancestors**. Now, hundreds of years later, the people of Israel are **once again in a tough place**. But this time they're in exile, conquered by the Babylonians. The circumstances are different, but still so very painful. They had to be experiencing similar emotions to those that their ancestors had felt, feeling **lost, homesick, discouraged, possibly hopeless, adrift from their anchor, maybe even questioning God's power to save, God's will to save...**

So I think Isaiah brings up the Exodus experience of their ancestors to **remind** them that God has been more than able to handle tough situations in the past. But its like he's saying, *"Hey! Don't just dwell on the past! Don't get stuck there. Don't expect God to do the very same things now in the very same way that He did before! While we have much to give thanks for in the ways God has made a way in the past, don't act as if nostalgia is your only hope! God may very well do something **brand-new!** God, our Creator, is **a creative problem-solver!** God created us in God's image, so if we have imaginations, **think about what God's must be like!** You ain't seen nothin' yet! So stay alert. Stay present!"*

I think the Israelites were learning that faith can be hard to hang on to when life gets hard. There can be all kinds of tough circumstances that hit us and begin piling up and before we know it, we're in pretty poor shape.

A Lutheran pastor that we know from the Seattle area - Ed Markquart - preached on this passage a number of years ago. For the sermon, he brought into the chancel an old desk that he had just refinished.

Prior to starting the project, he had consulted with an antique dealer that specialized in restoring old furniture. He asked the dealer what it took to be an excellent restorer. The dealer responded, *"Imagination! Creative imagination! You have to see past all the layers of paint, chips, past the mars and scars. You have to look past all the faults in the wood and past the broken pieces. You need to be able to see the piece of furniture in its*

original beauty. You actually get kind of excited about the possibilities that you see beneath the surface."

"Then, you have to have time and energy. Not a little bit of time and energy, but a lot of time and energy. These things don't happen overnight. It takes time. Also, love is more important than skill. The skills are important but can be learned.. More important than skill is loving the possibilities you can see in the furniture."

Following that conversation, Ed began working on an old painted desk that had been given to him. He stripped off the old paint and varnish. He sanded and sanded and sanded. He fixed one of the legs that was broken. Then he began to rebuild the finish with a nice stain, varnish, varathane, sanded it with steel wool, another coat of varathane, etc., until six coats later, he had a "new" desk.

He then talked about how God makes a way, and makes things new. It usually involves words that begin with "re" - like **reconciliation, restoration, rebirth, renewal, resurrection...** When these occur in life, it is always God working...

Thank God that keeping the faith is not something we have to do on our own power. God looks at us and sees the possibilities unique to each of us. God's imagination goes to work and sees what we need and God provides the renewing, the restoring.

God, stir our memories, stir our imaginations...

Psalm 126 is the seventh of fifteen psalms that have been given the title of A Song of Ascents (Psalms 120-135)

These psalms are generally thought to have been used by Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for one of the major festivals. The psalms are almost all fairly short, so they could be easily memorized. They have a variety of themes, some dealing with matters of daily life, like spouses and children and friends, some with national concerns.

I like how the idea of "song of ascents" fits with Lent, as we Christians follow the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. And although I've only been to Jerusalem once, I remember that it is a city on a hill. If you're heading to Jerusalem from almost any direction there, you'll be heading "up" to the city.

Note that the first three verses of the psalm seem to be looking back in time, remembering. The pilgrims are remembering how God graciously "restored their fortunes," most likely thinking back to the way God had delivered them from captivity in Babylon.

Biblical scholar and teacher, Stan Mast, has described the situation this way: "They had spent seventy long years in the Babylonian captivity, exiled from everything that had defined and enriched their lives. They had lost everything. Perhaps they were thinking, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?"* Things had seemed hopeless. They couldn't imagine a way out.

So when the Lord brought the exiled people back to Zion, they couldn't believe it. "We were like men who dream." It was like they had to pinch themselves to believe it was really happening. Their God had actually intervened in the affairs of nations who were so powerful that they had come close to destroying God's people. God had raised up the Persians to defeat the Babylonians - who were holding the Israelites captive. Then the king of Persia (Cyrus) had promptly and inexplicably set the captives free. Suddenly they were free to go home.

So was life a breeze from then on for the Israelites? No! As Stan Mast again described it: "The problem was that so few had come back home, and home was such a mess, and the neighbors were such a problem. It was a small band of refugees, and the "Promised Land" was like a desert. They had no homes. Their fields and vineyards - not having been cultivated in years - had gone wild. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, and their Temple had been demolished. Their neighbors, themselves victims of the Babylonian policy of moving conquered people to foreign lands, resented and feared the restored Jews. They were home for the holidays, but home wasn't what it used to be."

Can you imagine how depressing, how paralyzing the situation might have seemed to them as they tried to take in what would need to be done to make their land a home again?

But that's what life is often like, isn't it? We may experience God's help in one situation and then right around the corner is another challenge. A person survives one argument in their marriage but then another issue pops up that sparks another argument. A person endures physical therapy after breaking a bone in a fall, but realizes it will be a long, long road ahead involving doing the exercises and discipline and discomfort and pain before being able to dance again. A person grieves the death of a friend or loved one, and before getting through the grief, another friend or relative dies.

So in verses 4-6 the pilgrims pray. They remember what God has done for them in the past. They know they need God's help yet again, for what is currently happening.

"Do it again, God!" is the prayer. Bring water to the seeds of faith that have been planted, that are buried, that can't be seen. **Help us to imagine** the time that's coming when the faith-seeds push through the soil and hit the sun's rays and grow and bear fruit and food.

We who are Christians believe that God works unseen but steadily in the dark. We remember that when Jesus suffered so horrifically and then died, it looked like evil and suffering and death had won. But it wasn't so. Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to many.

We haven't experienced God's full redemption yet - the promise to make all things new - people and creation! But because of God's faithfulness in the past, and because of Jesus, we believe that day is surely coming.

God, stir our memories, stir our imaginations...

We heard a lot about the Academy Awards this past week in the news. Some of us look at their glittery and glamorous lives and imagine they've got it made, that they have everything they could ever need...

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find a person whose perspective - whose way of seeing had been changed. Paul, in his pre-conversion life as Saul, had been an achiever. In the world's eyes, he was on his way up in life. He had a pedigree and an education that was envied. He had personal achievements under his belt at an early age. He had that hunger, that zeal that one doesn't want to get in the way of. He wanted to live a life of righteousness - doing the right things at the right time in the right way - and he thought that was the way to have a relationship with God - he had to do it by himself with God watching from a distance. And he hated Jesus and any of the followers of Jesus, because they were a threat to his way of thinking. He was willing to have the followers of Jesus killed if need be.

God imagined just what Paul needed in order to be humbled and to become open to God's truth and God's way of doing things. Paul had a miraculous experience on the road to Damascus one day, where he was temporarily blinded by a great flash of light and the voice of Jesus asking him why he was persecuting him. Paul was then ministered to by believers who taught him and cared for him. It **turned his life around**. Now he believed, he "saw" that Jesus was the Son of God, that Jesus had suffered and died for him.

Now any of his own big accomplishments - he **imagined** them being torn up and thrown out with the trash. Why? Because "compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as his Master, firsthand, everything he had once thought he had going for himself was now insignificant - dog dung." Paul said, "I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by Him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ - God's righteousness."

Now Paul's once blurred vision about what was important had been cleared. His imagination had been cleansed. It was such a turn around that now his desire was to know Christ personally, to experience his resurrection, to be a partner in his suffering if need be, to go all the way with him to death itself. He was under no illusion of having it all together. But he was on his way, reaching out to Christ, who had reached out to him.



God, cleanse our memories of what is trash. Cleanse our imaginations so that we can see what is life-giving.

Finally, in today's Gospel text, we've moved from Luke to the book of John. And Jesus, just prior to his entry into Jerusalem, has been invited to dinner at the home of a family who were friends of his and who many of us have met before, the family of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus.

If you've read this Gospel, you know that one of the miracles Jesus had previously done was to raise Lazarus from the dead, to call him out of the tomb where he had been buried four days earlier. Perhaps they are now having a dinner to celebrate his renewed life!

Whatever the case, Martha is serving. She does that well. It is one of her gifts. I like to imagine that she was a great cook. I wonder if Mary gave her any help with this meal?

Lazarus is at the table with Jesus. And Lazarus was someone Jesus loved. John tells us that Jesus had wept when the mourners took him to see where Lazarus had been buried. I think it is also interesting that we never hear a word from Lazarus. Not one word. We hear from both of his sisters, but nothing from him. If I imagine the situation, I wonder if Lazarus was disabled in some way. Maybe he couldn't talk.

Whatever the case, his life is a testimony to the power of Jesus. Who could ever imagine that **simply living and being loved by Jesus** can be a beautiful witness to the gospel, a service to our Master?

And we're told that the other sister, Mary, came in to where Jesus was seated at the table - carrying a jar of very expensive aromatic oils. She anointed and massaged the feet of Jesus with these oils, and then wiped them with her hair.

Can you imagine why someone would do this? Judas obviously couldn't. He felt the oils should have been sold and the money given to the poor-- not that he really cared for the poor... We're about to see more of his character revealed in the coming weeks.

We're told the perfume filled the room! I imagine Chanel #5's Chance filling the room - my favorite perfume. What a contrast to their prior experience at the tomb where - when Jesus told people to remove the stone in front of Lazarus's tomb - Martha said, *"Lord, the stench will be awful! He's been dead four days!"*

The response to Mary's action from Jesus is hard to decipher in the Greek. But I think Mary had heard and believed and remembered what Jesus had said about his coming death. As a way to honor him, she had bought the expensive oils in anticipation of his death. That's the way the Message version translates it: *"Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."*

Whatever the case, something (perhaps the Spirit) moved her to anoint the feet of Jesus right then and there. Her love and compassion had to spill out in that act. And very soon, we'll remember that at that last meal before his death, the grace and love and compassion of Jesus will spill out for his followers as he washes their feet.

God's big and all-encompassing love for us and for the world, we see its extravagance in Jesus...

God, anoint our memories and imaginations with the grace, the love, the compassion of Jesus, so that we can be your witnesses to those in need of help and hope.

Amen!

