

SERMON TITLE: "Remember"
TEXT: Psalm 105-106
PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church
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REMEMBER...

Rene Descartes was a famous philosopher in the 1600's who coined the phrase *I think therefore I am.*" Now that is a somewhat obscure statement that *has* occupied and *continues* to occupy peculiar people who like to think about such things. Most of us probably don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about how we can prove our own existence to ourselves!

For most of us, a more accurate statement would be this one: *I remember therefore I am.*

Have you ever stopped to think about the role that memory plays in how you understand yourself? How you understand your family, your community, your world? In many ways, who we are is a product of what we remember about ourselves.

You see this very clearly with kids, as they begin to form their own identities and understand themselves as unique beings in the world.

Dad, remember that time I fell out of my crib? Remember when I went on the rollercoaster... how I was scared at first, but then I did it? Remember when I scored that goal? Remember that picture I drew for you? Remember that birthday party? Remember when I wasn't very good at printing, when I mixed up my d's and my b's? Remember that grade I got on my grade 12 exams? Remember when you got mad at me for x, y, z....? Remember that trip... those friends... that dog on the farm...?

And it's not just kids that do this. We do it as grownups too!

Remember that conversation we had? Remember that project I completed? Remember that first job... that scholarship I got that I didn't think I would ever get? Remember when we fell in love? Remember that house... those friends... that car... that boat... that accident? Remember that time I lost my job? Remember when grandpa died? Remember how we felt... what we did? Remember that anniversary... that reunion? Remember how good it was to see that friend after all those years? Remember that obstacle we overcame together, even though it looked impossible at the time? Remember how those years shaped us and made us who we are today?

And we remember as churches as well.

Remember that first service... that baptism... that service project... those classes... that song we used to sing... that pastor... that person that came through our doors that we initially thought was so strange but who turned out to be so wise and such a gift?

*Remember that building? Remember how **good** God has been to us? Remember how real he seemed, how close, how present and powerful? Remember how excited we were... how we loved and served each other?*

Remember those dark times? Remember when we stumbled? Remember that tragedy... those failures... how broken we were? Remember how we sinned and hurt each other?

Remember when God seemed so distant? Remember when it was all we could do to go through the motions, trusting that we were doing some good even if we couldn't see it at the time?

Do you remember?

Each of these “remembers” plays a role in the ongoing process of discovering who we are and how we understand ourselves—whether as individuals or as a community. Each little “remember” is one piece of the bigger puzzle, one corner of one room in the house that is a life, or a family... Or a church.

A huge part of who we understand ourselves to be is the product of what we remember:

- the people we have known who have shaped us (for better or for worse)
- the places we've been
- the things we've done, the things we *haven't* done
- the faith communities that have formed us along our journeys

We are what we remember.

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As you know, we are currently studying the book of Psalms. And the Psalms have quite a bit to say about remembering—both *what* we remember, *how* we remember, and *why* we remember.

[I hope that throughout this series you will actually get into the habit of reading the Psalms—and not just the ones we happen to preach on! There are all kinds of resources out there that can get you started on reading the Psalms as a regular part of your prayer life (talk to me if you're interested!).]

Over the last two Sundays, James has given us the picture of reading the Psalms as part of a “balanced biblical diet.” He mentioned that for many churches, a passage from the Psalms is read each Sunday, along with a Gospel text, an OT reading, and an Epistle reading.

The Psalms have always been an important part of the life of the church! They have been around for almost two and a half centuries!

They took almost a thousand years to put together, with numerous different authors (David has over 70, but there is also Asaph, the sons of Korah, and others) and contexts (sometimes a stable monarchy, more often a people in exile).

You will notice that they are arranged into five books—the reason they are because they are supposed to mirror the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch). That’s how they worked in Israel’s life.

They reflect the life and worship of the nation of God’s people over a long period of time. They tell Israel’s story in prayer.

The last words on Jesus’ lips on the cross were from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...”

So, the Psalms are an important part of our story, an important part of a balanced biblical diet.

But the Psalms *themselves* are a kind of diet comprised of many different kinds of “food.” If the Psalms are one of the four biblical “food groups”—say, dairy products—then the individual *types* of Psalms that we are studying would be the many different ways we can get our dairy quotient. Just like we can eat cheese and yogurt, or drink milk to get our dairy, so we can use a variety of types of Psalms to get this part of our Psalms quotient!

Last week James preached on Psalm 1, which is an example of a “wisdom Psalm” (i.e., it tells us wise ways to live). In the coming weeks we will look at the Psalms of Lament (interestingly, the biggest group—over 60 Psalms!), Psalms of Praise/Thanksgiving, Royal Psalms, and Psalms of Pilgrimage. Each kind of Psalm reflects an important part of the overall diet. Each kind was part of Israel and the church’s worship for centuries. Each kind gives us insight into what a life of honest worship looks like. As one commentator puts it,

Where our hearts go, the Psalms sing with us.

Today we are going to be looking at what are called “Psalms of Remembrance.” One of the things that I have observed throughout my first two years here is how often a passage or a theme for a sermon that we will have decided upon months or weeks prior to a given Sunday will turn out to be very appropriate for that particular day! Today this is absolutely the case. We are nearing the end of another church year, our AGM is coming up right after the service, we are reflecting on the year that has passed and looking ahead to the future—all of this makes a sermon on the “remembering Psalms” very appropriate!

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I have given myself the nearly impossible (and quite possibly foolish!) task of preaching on *two entire Psalms* (105 & 106) this morning! This breaks a whole number of

preaching rules that I learned during my studies about choosing appropriate text units for sermons, but I'm going to do it anyway.

I had originally decided to use only Psalm 106 (still a big text), but the more I read and prepared, the more I was convinced—for reasons that I hope will become apparent—that Psalm 106 needs to be heard alongside Psalm 105 as we approach our year end as a church and look to next year.

I will obviously not be reading both Psalms—they are 93 verses all told and take up a full two pages in my bible—but I hope to give you a good enough sense of what they are about to inspire you to read them in their entirety this week!

The two Psalms both tell the story of Israel in song form, but with very different emphases.

If you have your Bibles, I would encourage you to have them open so that you can see the passages I'm going to refer to in our whirlwind tour.

PSALM 105: REMEMBER THE WONDERFUL WORKS HE HAS DONE

Psalm 105 begins like this:

- ¹ *Give praise to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.*
- ² *Sing of him, sing his praises;
tell of all his wonderful acts.*
- ³ *Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*
- ⁴ *Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.*
- ⁵ *Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,*
- ⁶ *you his servants, the descendants of Abraham,
his chosen ones, the children of Jacob.*

What proceeds is a retelling of Israel's story in poetry—a “remembering” of the wonders God has done:

- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 9-10)
 - o We see the story of the covenant God makes with Abraham
 - o A covenant for land, descendants
- Joseph (v. 17-25)
 - o An instrument of God's blessing even when things looked dark
 - o God made his people fruitful—too numerous for their foes (Egyptians)
- Moses (v. 26-45)
 - o Liberation!
 - o Plagues

- Brought his people out with silver & gold
- Manna (provision in the desert)

Psalm 105 begins with the command to praise the Lord, to remember the wonders he has done and it ends like this:

⁴⁵ *that they might keep his precepts
and observe his laws.*

All of God's blessings—all of the works that Israel was to remember and give praise for—were meant to lead to obedience.

If I were to summarize Psalm 105, I would do it like this: *Remember the wonderful works that God has done so that you will love joyfully and obediently in the land and the life God has called you into!*

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PSALM 106: THEY DID NOT REMEMBER

So, that is a very quick sketch of what Psalm 105 is about. What about Psalm 106? Why do I think they need to be taken together?

With Psalm 106, the theme changes. We are still dealing with a Psalm that talks about remembering, but it's not a happy Psalm like 105.

The introduction is similar—in verses 1-5 we see a declaration of praise, a request for blessing, a plea for salvation... all pretty standard stuff. But from verse 6 onward, we see that the Psalmist is urging a different kind of remembering—not as much what God has done as what his people have done. Or not done.

*From 106:6 all the way until 106:43 the Psalmist recounts the way that Israel had, throughout its story, **failed** to do precisely what Psalm 105 said they should do.*

They had failed to remember the wonderful works God had done.

Psalm 106 picks up Israel's story where Psalm 105 left off: with Moses. It's not pretty reading! I made a list of a number of the verbs/verb expressions that the Psalmist tells us the people have done. This is not an exhaustive list, but think of it as a hall of shame from Israel's history, as told by the Psalmist:

- gave no thought (v. 7)
- did not remember (v. 7)
- rebelled by the Red Sea (v. 7)
- forgot what he had done (v. 13)
- did not wait (v. 13)
- gave in to their craving (v. 14)

- put God to the test (v. 14)
- grew envious of Aaron and Moses (v. 16)
- worshiped an idol (v. 19)
- forgot the God who saved them (v. 21)
- despised the pleasant land (v. 24)
- did not believe his promise (v. 24)
- grumbled (v. 15)
- did not obey (v. 25)
- ate sacrifices offered to “lifeless gods” (v. 28)
- adopted their customs (v. 35)
- sacrificed their children (v. 37)
- shed innocent blood (v. 38)
- defiled themselves (v. 39)

There is a trajectory at work here that I think we need to pay attention to and learn from.

It begins with a failure to remember. The Israelites “gave no thought” to the miracles God performed. And when they didn’t pay attention, they forgot. They didn’t allow the things they had seen and experienced and been transformed by come to mind.

They didn’t remember.

And *because* they did not remember, they did not *obey* (which, remember, was the point of Psalm 105—remember in order to obey). They acted wickedly, they rebelled, they grew envious, they didn’t wait.

Bad remembering led to bad behaviour.

And where does this sorry pattern end up? It ends up where we always end up when we don’t think and live according to who we really are and who God really is: **idolatry**.

The last part of the Psalm (v. 34-39) describes a pretty gruesome scene of bowing down to false gods, child sacrifice, defilement and prostitution, and the land being “desecrated with blood.”

In other words, it ends up with God’s chosen people—his image bearers, those who were to represent him to the nations, who were to be an instrument of blessing for all nations according to Genesis 12—becoming sub-human.

And it all began with a failure to remember.

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AND US?

So what do these two Psalms have to say to us, here in Nanaimo two and a half millennia after they were written? What do they say to us as we approach our year-end and think about where we have been and where we are going as a church?

Well, I think some of the applications are fairly obvious.

1. WE NEED TO BE A PEOPLE WHO REMEMBER AND TELL OF GOD'S WONDERFUL WORKS!

We need to listen to Psalm 105 and remember and retell the wonderful works he has done among us, whether as individual Christians, as families, as this particular church community, or as a part of the big church throughout time.

As we look to the future, we need to thank God for his wonderful works right here in Nanaimo—a community that began in 1981, that is part of a particular denomination, that has been shaped by particular people at particular times and in particular ways, a community that has particular shortcomings and tragedies, particular joys and triumphs.

And we can't tell ourselves or others about these things unless we remember.

We need to remember all the people, the blessings, the impact we have been able to have in our community, the trials God has delivered us through.

And we need to continue to remember well as we move into the future. Everything we do as a church in the coming years has to come out of the foundation of remembering who we are and telling this story to ourselves and to our community.

We need to know our story because we can't learn from it if we don't know it!

From preschool all the way into adulthood, from Sunday school classes to care groups, to Sunday morning worship, to service in our neighbourhoods, we need to keep learning our story, who we are as Christians.

We need to immerse ourselves in the story of Israel, the story of the gospels and the early church, the story of Christian history. We need to remember how God has worked throughout history—from the big picture of our world, down to our individual histories. We need to pay attention to God's voice and remember how he has led and guided us.

2. WE ALSO NEED TO HEED THE WARNING OF PSALM 106.

The warning? Not remembering leads to idolatry.

The Hall of Shame from Psalm 106 all stemmed from an initial forgetting—of who Israel was, who God is, about what God had promised, and what he had done.

Like Israel, we still sin. We still forget, we still disbelieve and grumble.

And we still go chasing after our idols. They may not be statues or carvings of bulls, and our idolatry might not be as bloody and gruesome as described in the Psalm. Our idols might be technology or entertainment, or our careers. Or the age old idols of sex and money.

The idols may even be ourselves. Yesterday we were down in Victoria with my parents and my mom saw an advertisement for a spa whose slogan was pretty blatant: “Worship yourself.” We aren’t used to seeing it proclaimed that explicitly, but we live in a culture that encourages self-absorption and indulgence.

There are never a shortage of options for us to pursue in place of the God who created us.

But all idols tempt us to become less than we were created to be.

We need to be a people who acknowledge our sinfulness and our forgetfulness and our idolatry. We need to admit our mistakes so we don’t need to repeat them.

Often I read about the history of Israel and I think, *How could they be so stupid?! How could they keep making the same mistakes over and over when God showed himself so clearly to them?!*

But when I stop to think about it, I realize that I do the *same thing*. I forget. I am ungrateful. “Was that really God who led me at that point? Maybe it had more to do with my own cleverness...” I rebel, even though when I take the time to remember my story, how God has worked throughout the various stages of my own story and the story of my family, God’s hand is all over the pages of my story.

Remembering properly doesn’t come by default. But we need to be honest with ourselves, with one another, and before God. We need to be a people who confess our sins.

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A REMEMBERING GOD

And, finally, there is more to the story than our ability or our inability to remember as we should. God remembers.

2X in Psalm 105:

- V. 8: **He remembers** his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations.
- v. 42: **He remembered** his holy promise given to his servant Abraham

1X in Psalm 106:

- v. 44-45: *Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake, he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.*

Despite our forgetting and our idolatry... God remembers.

The Hebrew word for “remember” is not exactly the same as our English word. It has to do with much more than mental recall of things forgotten. In this case, it means **“to act upon a previous commitment to a covenant partner.”** It has to do with aligning one’s actions with one’s words; it has to do with faithfulness of character.

Why does God remember? Why does he save us in spite of ourselves. He remembers for two reasons:

Psalm 106:8:

*⁸ Yet he saved them for his name's sake,
to make his mighty power known.*

He remembers and is faithful to his promise because it is in his nature to do so, and to forget his people would be against his character. For *his name’s sake*, he remembers us.

*⁴⁵ for their sake he remembered his covenant
and out of his great love he relented.*

He remembers and is faithful to his promise because he loves his forgetful people and he delights in showing mercy. For *our sake*, he remembers us.

God does not forget like we do. He remembers his promises to guide and bless us.

We can have confidence that even when we are forgetful and idolatrous, God is not. Even when we forget God, he remembers us.

This is not a license to be forgetful or to live carelessly or anything like that.

It is simply a reminder that God’s love is a determined love, a persistent love. It is a love that is bigger than all our forgetfulness. This is good news at the outset of any church year!

This is the message of Psalms 105-106.

May God help us to be a church that remembers well—in the coming year, and beyond—that we might live obediently; that we might give thanks to his holy name, and glory in his praise.

Amen

