

Remember the Lord Your God

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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What better place to start a Thanksgiving Sunday sermon than with a bit of seventeenth-century philosophy?

(I know we have a few people in the room currently taking philosophy courses. They might be the only ones intrigued by that first sentence!)

Rene Descartes was a famous French philosopher who coined the phrase *I think therefore I am.*"

This somewhat obscure statement has occupied peculiar people who like to think about such things for a very long time.

Descartes was trying to reach some undoubtable foundation upon which to build a system of thought. He looked around and decided that everything could be doubted. Nothing could be known with one hundred percent certainty.

But, he said, of all the things that I can doubt in the world, the one thing I *can't* doubt is that I am the one thinking and having doubts!

Now, most of us probably don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about how we can prove our own existence to ourselves! There are better, or at least more practical ways that we can spend our time.

For most of us, a slightly different, 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 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 when I wasn't very good at printing, when I mixed up my d's and my b's? 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... the times we had?

Remember that time I lost my job? 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... 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 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?

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.

This is why it is so hugely devastating when illness or disease begin to rob people of their memory. Without memory, we struggle to have a stable conception of who we are. Without shared memories, identities and relationships are altered, sometimes permanently.

I know some of you know this in very deep and painful ways as you’ve watched it happen to people you love.

For better or for worse, very often we are what we remember.

There is a resounding call that echoes throughout the Old Testament. It’s like a drum beat. It is persistent. It is insistent.

Remember the Lord your God. Or, the reverse: Do not forget the Lord your God.

Both show up in today’s reading from Deuteronomy.

It’s not a hard passage to understand. The Hebrews are standing on the plains of Moab, at the doorstep of the land of promise.

They have been delivered from the chains of slavery in Egypt. They have been given the Law. They have blundered through the wilderness for forty years due to their idolatry, their lack of faith.

They have been delivered and rescued, humbled, and tested. And now, Moses gives them a sermon as they prepare to move into the land.

It’s a simple sermon.

Don’t forget the Lord. Don’t think they all these things that you are about to enjoy — all the bounty of the land, etc. — are because of what you have done.

Continue to obey. Continue to have the proper attitude of humility: “do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (8:14).

Remember who is the source of your life. Remember where all these blessings come from.

There is a fairly obvious Thanksgiving application here.

Many of us will go home today to full tables and give thanks for the blessings we enjoy.

The blessings of food and shelter and clothing...

The blessings of health and strength...

The blessings of political freedom and peace (not least as we watch the events taking place in Israel and Gaza since yesterday, and as we think of the many parts of our world where there is no peace)...

The blessings of people who love us and people to love...

The blessings of meaningful work or hobbies...

The blessings of bikes and computers and coffee and comfortable chairs to read in and coffee and board games and quilting and watching sports on TV and beautiful fall colours (these last few weeks have been gorgeous in southern AB. The colours are amazing, and we haven't yet had a stiff wind to blow all the leaves off the trees!)....

The *things* we are thankful for are likely as diverse as we are as human beings.

But our text today teaches us to focus less on the *things* we are grateful for than on the *source* of all blessing.

To give thanks for something carries with it the assumption that there is someone to be grateful *to*.

There are many people who have no interest in God who are, I suppose, generically thankful on this day. But I would submit that this is inconsistent.

You can be pleased at your luck, you can express a vague sense of pleasure at the stuff that you happen to enjoy, you can sort of participate in good feelings that come along with this time of year.

But to be truly *thankful* implies that there is someone to give thanks *to*. It's difficult to be thankful to the impersonal cosmos or to karma or to dumb luck. It's difficult to be thankful when you don't actually think that there is a Giver of gifts.

The decision to *give thanks* is fundamentally a decision about God—about who God is, about how God loves, and about the proper order of things in our life.

To *fail* to give thanks is to forget what matters most.

And Israel would indeed forget the Lord their God. Indeed, the entire story from here in Deuteronomy until the last page closes in Malachi, another persistent theme resounds throughout the OT.

They have forgotten the Lord their God.

Even by the end of Deuteronomy, we read these words which are spoken in different ways throughout Scripture, but always in response to the same realities of idolatry and injustice, of turning away from God:

¹⁸ You deserted the Rock, who fathered you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth (Deut. 32:18).

To forget, in Scripture, is not simply to fail to recall a relevant piece of data.

It can include this, but more precisely it refers to a turning away — a turn from God and toward self.

It probably goes without saying that this temptation was not unique to the ancient Hebrews. It is our temptation, too.

This week, Norwegian author Jon Fosse was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

I don't know exactly what made me click on the link to the story. The Nobel Prize isn't something that I spend a great deal of time thinking about.

But I read the article. And I came across a part where it said it said that Fosse was "A former atheist who found religion later in life." Well, I happen to have a professional interest in those kinds of stories!

I clicked on another link to an interview with Fosse in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* where he explained his "conversion":

In my teens, I was a kind of stupid Marxist and atheist — it was the normal thing to be in those days for young, aspiring intellectuals. But in the process of writing, there was something I couldn't quite understand, some mystery: where does it come from? It doesn't come from here [*points to his heart*]. No, it's from out there.

I started to believe in God as a person, in a way. I call myself a believer in God, as a presence simultaneously out there and right here.¹

I have long thought of unbelief less as a stubborn refusal to think clearly or of processing the "evidence" inadequately or anything like that.

I think that reason plays a role in faith, but when we are talking about God and faith, hope, and love, we are talking about an unseen reality, about things that can never be proved.

Faith is not primarily an intellectual exercise, but an orientation of the heart.

I have increasingly been thinking of unbelief as a kind of forgetting. Less about not calibrating the data properly than not paying sufficient attention to things. Things like art, mortality, beauty, love, life, death, joy, sorrow.

Jon Fosse discovered this in the process of writing. *There was something I couldn't quite understand, some mystery: where does it come from?* The inspiration, the impulse, the connection to deeper things, the... something!

There was something outside of himself that demanded a reckoning.

¹ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-second-silent-language-a-conversation-with-jon-fosse/>

But it can be easy — so easy! — to ignore this something.

It takes so little effort to just drift across the surface of life, ignoring what matters most, not being curious enough, dismissing the wonder that we perhaps once had as children.

It is so easy to flit about from distraction to distraction, not bothering to paying attention to the deep questions that life asks of us.

And all too easily, our life becomes characterized by a kind of careless forgetfulness.

The challenge from Moses on the threshold of Canaan is also given to us. Remember the Lord your God. Don't forget his many blessings. Don't imagine that you did all this yourself. Don't become arrogant.

Remember.

To remember includes recalling God's work in the past. It is to call to mind the people, places, things, events, experiences through which God has worked to form us as his children.

It is to attend well to all of life. To ask, as Jon Fosse said, "Where does it come from?"

A life of attending well and choosing not to forget is also a life of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Here, too, we find it so easy to not do this. But why?

Why do we not give thanks to God for the good things in our lives? The unexpected gifts? The instances of grace?

Perhaps we simply take goodness for granted.

We hear often about the problem of evil — about the struggle to believe in the goodness of God amid all the pain and misery we see in our world.

But we don't often hear about "the problem of good." Why should there be such a thing as beauty? Why should sunsets and mountains and little babies and oceans and prairie fields affect us the way they do?

Why should instances of love move us? Why should there be such a thing as grace?

None of these things *needed* to be in our world, nor did we *need* to be the kind of creatures who responded to them as we do.

And yet these things and our deep connection to them seldom seem to require explaining. We just assume that they should be part of the world we inhabit.

Or perhaps it is guilt. How can we thank God for our blessings when so many have so little around the world? Isn't it a little flippant and insensitive to praise God for our blessings when these blessings are not experienced by others?

(I'll confess that I felt a bit of this while writing a sermon on Thanksgiving as Israel and Gaza descended into chaos this weekend!)

Perhaps it is suspicion that cultivating a life of gratitude won't *work*.

Maybe we worry that an open-handed and openhearted approach to life will lead to our being taken advantage of or mocked or ridiculed.

Perhaps we think that people will see us as naïve—as if anyone who *really* understood the world couldn't *possibly* respond with gratitude.

There are many reasons why we aren't instinctively grateful people.

At the end of the day, though, ingratitude is easy. It's too easy. It's not hard to find things in our world and in our lives *not* to be thankful for.

Choosing gratitude is like an act of defiance.

It is a declaration that the many things that weigh us down and (rightly) make us sad and angry and confused are, ultimately, passing away—that they are less real than the good, the true, the beautiful.

To remember, to not forget God, to give thanks... these are all conscious decisions that we make, sometimes despite how things are going in our lives and in our world.

It is to decide in advance that God is God, that we are not, and that God can ultimately be trusted with our lives.

That even should our memory fade, even should there come a time when our identities feel fragile and we struggle to know who we are, even though there may be times in our lives where we drift away from God in painful and destructive ways... that God remembers us.

This is among the deepest hopes of the Christian faith. This theme, too, resounds throughout Scripture.

God is the great Rememberer.

God remembers his people, even when his people forget or turn their back on God. Our sin and forgetfulness and inattention are not match for mercy of God. God pursues his people always, with a fierce and relentless love.

This is the good news of the Gospel.

And on this Thanksgiving Sunday, this is what we should be most grateful for.

Thanks be to God. Always.

Amen.

