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**“How Soon We Forget”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
February 4, 2018
Isaiah 40:21-31**

Some time ago, on Facebook, someone posted a link called “Remembering.” This link invited you to share a memory you have of friends. When I posted this on my Facebook page, the memories started flooding in. Friends of all ages began to post their memories of a time we shared. I was overwhelmed by them – some friends wrote deep and thoughtful reflections that brought me to tears, while others wrote of hilarious times we had shared which caused me to double over with laughter. But some were also surprising. Because they reminded me of memories I no longer retained. They were lost to me and were no longer a part of my active brain cells. I could not believe how much I had forgotten! But we humans can only remember so much, right? So many things are filed into the extraneous material bins in our brain and even events that were significant at the time are quickly and quietly forgotten.

We forget events, and we also forget skills we once had! You may have made straight A's in your high school or college Calculus class, but when your son asks you for a little help understanding a homework problem – then it's back to the drawing board! You may have been able to recite all the elements in order on the periodic table, or you may have been able to quote major sections of Macbeth, or you may have been able to name all the major rivers of the world. Maybe you still can. But many of us find that such memories fade as the years pass and we no longer remember the things we once remembered.

But other things we never forget. Like how to ride a bike. Or how to swim. Or life changing moments, be they negative or positive. Some of you have etched in your mind the sound of a whippoorwill, or the sting of a bee, or the voice of your grandmother singing in the kitchen, the smell of grease in your father's shop, or the purr of your favorite cat. The memories are so much a part of our lives that they stay with us and become a part of the fabric of who we are.

I used to think that you had to be a part of a memory in order to claim it as your own. But I have come to understand that differently in my life. Sometimes we share memories even though they were not ever ours specifically:

Like the way we *remember* the Alamo. We remember the Holocaust. We remember a war, or a tragedy or a celebration, even if we didn't experience it firsthand. We also remember the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea and the wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. We remember the birth of Jesus, the stories of his life and betrayal, and his death and resurrection. In some ways it is as if we were there. These memories become a part of our own history, our faith history.

In our passage from Isaiah today, we find the prophet speaking to God's people who have forgotten their history! They are exiles in another country, Babylon. They are surrounded by the culture and history and gods of Babylon and they have forgotten their God! They have forgotten God's power and authority over everything else. They have turned to the idols of Babylon, to stars and kings and princes, in order to find their security and their strength. They have set their

minds on things that they can see and touch rather than the one God who is eternal and above everything else in the universe.

The prophet Isaiah is fully aware of the lost memory of God's people and so he comes to them in a whirlwind of rhetorical questions that challenge them to compare anything or anyone to the Lord their God.

The questions begin earlier in the chapter we read today, in verse twelve. The tone of this chapter reminds me of the ever popular "DUH!" "How could you not know this?" or worse, "How could you *forget* this?" The questions are almost hymnic in nature, at least rhythmic, with clear tones of praise and awe at this one who is the creator and ruler over all the world. This God has not *been* created; the Lord God IS the creator! This God has not *been* taught; the Lord God IS the teacher! This God has not *been* led, directed, or counseled; the Lord God IS the leader, director, and counselor! The nations? Not even enough to be measured. The isles? Dust. The Cedars of Lebanon? Mere twigs for fuel. Burnt offerings? Not enough. The nations are as nothing. No, wait a second. In fact, Isaiah reminds us that they are LESS than nothing. They are emptiness Nothing. Isaiah wants to make it perfectly clear. *Nothing* can compare to God! *No one* can

comprehend God's greatness! These passages are designed to remind Israel of the power of their God and to help them to see that the Lord God is without parallel and worthy of praise and trust.

The prophet invites ridicule at idols created by the hands of humanity. They are dismissed as subordinate to the power of God. They are not worthy of praise or trust.

In our twenty-first century lives, consumer society offers us so many temptations to turn away from God and to put our trust in whatever else might strike our fancy or target our fear with vain, empty promises:

We look in the mirror and fear aging, so we turn to creams and colors and special procedures and even surgeries that make us feel better . . . for a little while. We worship the idol of Youth.

We look at our checkbooks and fear poverty, or desire wealth, so we turn our attention to work and money-making and set aside our families, or we make

dishonest decisions, or careless ones, justifying them along the way because we have fallen prey to the materialistic mantra that more is better. We worship the idol of Money.

We look at the world and fear that which we don't understand, so we turn to prejudice, or racism, or bias toward "our own kind." We worship the idol of White Privilege or Racial Superiority.

We look at the world and believe that we must play the world's games. We sacrifice our families, our integrity, and our morals in order to reach the top. We worship the idol of Power.

We look at science and technology and believe that they can solve all the world's problems eventually, if not now, if we can just figure everything out. We worship the idol of Knowledge.

We look at ourselves and fear failure, so we pretend to be something that we are not, dishonest to our own selves and to our Creator, believing that we are

not worthy of love or appreciation or respect. Because we fear rejection, we don't let the world see us for who we really are. We worship the idol of Perfection.

In all this, we turn away from trusting the only One who can truly bring us peace, and hope, and life in all its abundance. We turn away from the only one who can renew our strength and save us from our suffering, not by making it go away, necessarily (as the world would falsely promise), but by giving us the strength beyond comprehension to deal with anything and everything that might come our way.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord God is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

And, being on this side of the resurrection, we Christians would add, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord God sent his only Son, Jesus our Lord, to live among us, to die for us, to be raised from the dead for us that we might have a new life, and power over sin and death.”

“ . . . Those who wait for the Lord will rise up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.”

You see, the prophet-poet Isaiah knows and claims the truth as clearly as he is able - and the truth is not about youth or beauty, power or money, or the illusion of control. All of these things are temporary, transient, completely *unworthy* of trust. The truth is that faith in God transforms *lives*, transforms the very way we experience the world, the very way we make our choices, the very way we live each and every day.

In 1936 Charlie Chaplin made a film called *Modern Times*, sort of a commentary on modern life. In one classic scene Charlie is working on a factory assembly line. In typical assembly-line fashion, his job is to stand in front of a conveyor belt, which takes a steady stream of rectangular thingamajigs past him. What they are is unclear – and unimportant- but each thingamajig is exactly the same, a small rectangular box. And Charlie’s job is to tighten two bolts on the top of each one as it goes by. Two quick turns of the wrist for every thingamajig, one thingamajig every two seconds for ten hours a day.

Well, at the end of one long day of bolt-tightening, some wire gets crossed in Charlie: the assembly line has driven him over the edge. And, long after the conveyor belt has stopped, he's still twisting his wrist. He's still looking for thingamajigs. So he stumbles around the factory tightening everything in sight: the bolts on other machines, his co-workers' buttons, his supervisor's nose. Endless hours of monotonous assembly-line living have turned him into a mindless cog, a human ratchet set, unable to break the habit, running from item to item and person to person tightening all the would-be bolts.¹

In 1936 that was Charlie Chaplin's take on modern times. And he has a point. Although the assembly line doesn't look quite the same anymore, modern times are still full of thingamajigs calling for attention, calling for our actions within a few seconds before the next one will roll by – you know, we operate on a long series of disconnected deadlines and meetings, grocery lists and laundry piles, supper plans and lesson plans, homework and papers, staff meetings and lunch meetings, soccer practice, basketball games, bus stops and gas stops,

¹ This story was found in *Where All Hope Lies*, by James R. Van Tholen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 42.

errands and chores, the rhythm of life. . . little turns of the wrist. Doing one thing - planning for the next. We are lulled by the rhythm of the world. Do this. Buy that. Be this. Love that. Prove this. Prove that. And we turn our wrist to the rhythm. Diligently. Endlessly. Lifelessly. Because we don't know what else to do. Because we have forgotten that there is another rhythm.

The rhythm of God, you see, is different. Listen for it. Hear its rhythm. Be strong and courageous enough to live outside of the rhythm the world offers. Be strong and courageous enough to live into God's rhythm. Only then, only when the rhythm of our lives is one that allows us to wait for the Lord, only then will we find our strength. Only then will we rise up with wings like eagles and see the world from a totally different point of view. Only then will we run and not be weary. Only then will we walk and not faint.

It is true. We were not *there* on the first day of creation, when God created the world out of nothing.

We were not there on the first day of Jesus' life, when God became human.

We were not there on the first day of Jesus' death, when God took upon himself the judgment that should have been our own.

We were not there on the first day of Jesus' resurrection, when God defeated death, when we were given life, and life everlasting.

We were not there then, but all of these events are a part of the memory we now share together as God's people. All these miracles are a part of our collective history. These memories invite us to live into a different rhythm, the only true rhythm - the rhythm of grace, the rhythm of freedom, the rhythm of love, the rhythm of life. May we wait for the Lord in this rhythm and never forget. Never, ever forget.

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