

LEST WE FORGET

Deuteronomy 6:10-12; Galatians 5:13-14; John 15:12-17

There is a good chance that in your pocket or purse you have a calendar for keeping up with appointments, also that you keep a running list on your kitchen counter or desk – or your electronic device - to ensure you get everything you need from the grocery. If you take medicine, you may have a pillbox that enables you to be certain you have not forgotten a dose. You and I have many strategies for remembering.

There are deeper realities than haircuts or ice cream – even blood pressure pills - that we need not to forget. “Remembering the Sabbath, to keep it holy” brings us here on Sundays for gathered worship. This helps to shift our focus to the Sovereign Presence of God in the world and in our lives. Observing Memorial Day on Monday helps us to remember those who have given their lives protecting what we value and benefit from as Americans. For a few minutes here, we will weave worship and the memorial observance together, with attention and intention to remember the providence and love of God that has always been and that continues to flow into and through humanity.

As Americans, we unquestioningly pledge to support the concept of “one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Keeping Church and State separate does not keep us from acknowledging that our nation, like every nation and all of life, is under God. Neither does it keep us from seeing that living without division and with liberty and justice for all is a portrait of Christian values, as well as declared national values. Nor does it keep us from connecting the sacrifice of those we remember on Memorial Day with the sacrificial love of God through Jesus Christ.

We remember well those words to our Pledge of Allegiance. We have been serious about committing them to memory. Do we remember as well what the words mean and do we make serious commitment to the reality they describe?

We acknowledge easily the presence of God. How easily do we remember and reflect in our living the presence and providence of God?

In the verses we read from Deuteronomy, the Hebrew people are advised that when God brings them into the land God promised through their ancestors more than 1,000 years earlier, and they find prosperity for which they played no part but which will support and satisfy them, they are **not to forget the God** who brought them out of their slavery in Egypt.

In the larger passage around these verses, God gives Joshua, who was then leading the people, a plan for remembering. As the whole nation has finished crossing the Jordan, on the brink of entering the land, God instructs Joshua to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests who have carried the ark of the covenant have stood, and to take the stones to the place where they will stay that night. These stones are to become a memorial, reminding them of what God has done, reminding them of their personal experience along the way, providing a means to share the story with future generations, and inspiring a new sense of personal and communal commitment in their walk with God.

That is what memorial observances and monuments do: remind us of what has been done before and of how we benefit personally, provide a platform for sharing with our children and those who come after, and inspire us to live lives of generativity in grateful response for what has been done for us.

The story of my life – your life – does not begin with you and me and not on the day we were born. My story and your story are part of our story, which includes who and what we all are now collectively, along with who and what has gone before. And our story is part of The Story, God’s Universal and Eternal Story.

The story of any community - any family or church or nation - does not begin in the present. We inherit and, like the Hebrew people, have had nothing to do with what has come before. Throughout time, God’s grace has been active - providing and empowering people for what is true and good and beautiful – not for anyone alone but in community.

Through the Trinitarian love of God – the creative and sustaining power of the Father, the model and sacrifice of the Son, and the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit - flowing in and through those who have come before us, we are brought to the life we have.

Without intentional remembrance, we easily slip into living as if we chose this life and we earned this life; and we may think less of those who live in different circumstances. We may think we chose the story of freedom for our life story, forgetting that we were born into the story of freedom, that it was actually chosen for us from before our birth.

Freedom was chosen also by the founders of this community that is our country. For close to 250 years, our freedom has been protected and defended through great sacrifice of life and limb and mental and emotional stability. Trauma has provided freedom for us. We still may not actually “get” what a community of freedom for everyone means, and we may have to

admit that community of freedom for everyone is not actually what we desire and work for. But we do get that our story of freedom does not begin with us.

What do we do with what we remember of that which precedes us? What do we do when we recall a parent's sacrifice in our behalf? What do we do in response to a visit to a monument or to a holiday for memorial observance? What do we do with the goosebumps we get when we sing of the "land of the free and the home of the brave"? What do we do in response to "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow," and "When I survey the wondrous Cross"?

Is remembering and acknowledging – and getting goosebumps or shedding tears enough? Or do we seek a fitting response to carry on the legacy of what we remember?

The Hebrew word for remember, *zakar*, includes response. *Zakar* involves moving remembrance from the mind and heart to some kind of activity. The Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna comments, "In the Bible, remembering, particularly on the part of God, is not the retention or recollection of a mental image, but a focusing upon the object of memory that results in action." When God remembered Noah and his flooding menagerie, God acted, making a wind blow over the earth and causing the water to subside. God remembered Noah by doing something – by sending the saving wind.

Focusing upon the object of our memory and envisioning how we can express care or gratitude moves us to action. It's as if we say, "Oh, I remember! Now what can I do?" When we consider what we remember as grace, we come to a sense of indebtedness that we cannot repay, except through commitment to pay it forward. Paying it forward takes the spirit of what has been done into the spirit of what we will do. The spirit lives on.

With this comes the inevitable question: when and what have we forgotten? How can we be aware that we may have forgotten? This may take some intention for discerning how truly our thoughts and actions may align with the truth and goodness and beauty of God. Have we possibly reversed our being created in God's image to creating God in our image? Do we find ourselves picking and choosing what there is of the gospel that we are willing to accept and follow? Do we accept only what is comfortable, forgetting the parts that are inconvenient or unpleasant or unlike what we think? Are we inclined to claim the hard-fought cause of freedom in this country for ourselves alone? Do we forget that the sacrifice is for more than ourselves?

Have we forgotten that God calls us to community and that the very essence of God is community? On this Trinity Sunday, we are reminded of how little we can comprehend of the Holy Trinity - God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. But we can get, it seems, that the concept

of Trinity holds a sense of a relatedness, a communion, an infinite flowing current of love between and among Father, Son and Spirit, not only sustaining and empowering us but giving us a model of what life can be - lived in communion.

Life lived in communion takes us beyond ourselves to those with whom we share life. If we have become isolated in our personal preferences and agendas, perhaps we have forgotten. If we have moved from a sense of gratitude to a sense of entitlement, perhaps we have forgotten. Each time we act from gratitude and love for someone or something outside ourselves with no thought of a return, it seems we may have remembered our basic identity as God's beloved children.

In this Memorial Day weekend, may we remember with gratitude those who took seriously life lived in community - who chose the way of greater love described in our Gospel reading, who laid down their lives, not for themselves but for a cause and for a people and a future beyond themselves. May we remember those among our family and friends who have given something of themselves for our well-being or for another's. May we pray that God will help us to remember - and accept - what we have forgotten of who God created us to be and how God desires that we live.

God gave Joshua a plan for remembering. "Take stones from where you have been to where you will stay." I invite you to take a stone today from the table in the vestibule and allow it to become a memory aid. Choose one that brings you to remembrance and allow it to move you to grateful response. May we be as intentional about remembering deeper realities as we are about consulting our calendars and lists.

With the phrase, "lest we forget," from Deuteronomy, God seems to be saying, "This is not to be forgotten." The words have been passed down through generations, included in poetry and services for remembrance, and inscribed on monuments for things too noteworthy to be forgotten.

One such poem is *Recessional*, by Rudyard Kipling. May we take the last two lines as our prayer: "*Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget – lest we forget!*" *Amen*