

Remembering God in the Midst of Our Blessings

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 26, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

As we prepare for Commitment Weekend on Nov 8-9, we continue our series: “Sharing Our Blessings”

Remembering¹

Much of the industrialized world is post-Christian, even post-religion. Less than 5% of the French go to a church, synagogue, or mosque weekly. In England, though more than 25 million people identify themselves as members of the Church of England, only 1.2 million of them go to services weekly. Even in Italy, less than 25% attend Mass weekly. Though sizeable majorities profess belief in God and even the importance of services at key moments in life, in truth, they have forgotten nearly all that there is to remember about God and the Christian faith. All this stands in sharp contrast to the developing world, the world of disease and deprivation, where the growth of Christianity is exploding. In 1900, just 9% of Africans were Christian. Today, it is 46%! By 2025, 50% of the world’s Christians will be in Africa and Latin America.

Why has so much been forgotten in the West? A young lawyer in Lagos, Nigeria, sees it this way: “In countries where everything is very o.k., where they take care of their citizenry, people are very lethargic when it comes to religion. They are not encouraged to ask for any help. They seem to have it all.” Moses said basically the same thing more than 3,000 years ago!

Today’s scripture passage is taken from Moses’ final speech to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land without him. Here, he warns them that in this land of milk and honey it would be very easy to forget God. They would build fine homes. They would grow rich and comfortable. Being human, they would be tempted to stand on the mountaintops shouting for all to hear – “Look what I have done! Behold my accomplishments!”

Remembering Jesus

Remembering God is far more than giving a passing nod to his existence. In a recent book, Allen Verhey asserts that following Jesus requires remembering him and it is primarily in scripture that the memory of Jesus is found. “By way of reminder,” Paul wrote “boldly” to the Christians in Rome (Romans 15:5) proclaiming again the Good News so that they might be “obedient to the faith” (1:5; 16:26). This remembering of Jesus has been the occupation of the church for 2000 years. Only by remembering Jesus can we seek to be Christlike in our own obedience.

I think we’d all agree that God wants only the best for us. Being obedient then becomes seeking after the sort of life for which we were created, not following some list of arbitrary rules. We come to the Bible as we seek to remember Jesus and understand such a life. It isn’t that we seek to live in the past, we seek to let the past live in us.

¹These figures and quotes come from recent articles in the *New York Times*, Oct 13 & 14, 2003, and from a more extensive look at the changes in Christendom that was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Oct 2002: “The Next Christianity” by Philip Jenkins. Jenkins’ article is still available on-line at www.theatlantic.com.

Moses knew how easy it would be for the Israelites to become “full of themselves,” thinking “I did all this. And all by myself. I’m rich. It’s all mine!”² How were the Israelites to avoid the temptation to forget God in their affluence and achievement? By keeping God’s commandments, his instructions to them. Every day and in all ways, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

By any measure, we at St. Andrew are an affluent congregation. I know that some of us go through hard times and I know that some of us would have trouble seeing ourselves as affluent, but look

Decompressing God

For many years, I tried to squeeze God into a small corner of my life. I tried to compress him into a tidy package that I could control and that would not interfere with my “real” life. I went to church, taught Sunday School from time to time, served on various committees, and sang in the choir. But my faith was shallow, it had no roots. I can’t ever really remember asking myself – what would God want me to do?

Only now, am I really beginning to understand how short-changed I was all those years! Yes, there is the “real” world that I can see and touch and smell. But every bit as real is the present-but-still-coming kingdom of God. Only now am I beginning to understand the writer of Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Of course, the truth is that I’m surrounded by stuff I can see and touch and smell. It takes some effort to hang on to the reality of God and his kingdom.

So, as Moses taught more than 3,000 years ago, we immerse ourselves in God. We “decompress” God . . . we let him fill every part of our lives . . . through worship and prayer and service and caring and study. We help each other in this, for we shouldn’t delude ourselves that it is easy. Christians have taken off for the desert or a mountaintop to try to stay centered upon God. We seek to remember God as we live out our exceedingly busy and frantic lives in Plano! Nonetheless, no less than the ancient Israelites, we strive to build our lives around the fullness of God.

around the sanctuary on Sunday or walk through the parking lots. We are an achievement oriented bunch and we live pretty well. Don’t think that I intend to demean accomplishments. God has entrusted his creation to our care. Surely, God prefers that we exercise our dominion well. Surely, God wants us to find delight in his creation, including what we are able to do with it. But the dangers here are grave. Jesus had more to say about the dangers of wealth than about virtually any other subject. He seemed to see wealth as being so dangerous – so radioactive! – that perhaps we simply ought to avoid it altogether. Not because wealth is inherently evil, but because of what it can do to us. Affluence can destroy us – it can make us forget who we are and who God is. There is something profoundly ironic here. The very blessings that God has showered upon us can, in the words of the young lawyer from Lagos, make us “lethargic” about God, even complacent and lukewarm.³

How do we remember?

Short of giving away all that we have, as Jesus advised the rich young ruler to do, what can we do? Somehow, we must learn to keep God at the very center of our day and our week, in all that we do. We do this by embedding ourselves in the worship of God and the fellowship of other Christians. We come to worship every week, not just when it is convenient or when the Cowboys play late. We join a Sunday morning class. We volunteer in the bookstore or for the Fall Festival or the Crop Walk. We join other Christians in bible studies or in choir. We pray always and without ceasing. We carry our affluence lightly, refusing to cling too tightly to our homes and cars and bank accounts. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and you’ll begin to see what I’m taking about. Moses tells the Israelites that they are to love God and keep his words in front of them at all times, even binding the words to their foreheads and writing them on their doorposts. They are to recite them to the children and talk about them at home and away, in the morning and in the evening. These images of total immersion tell us much about how we can go about remembering God in the midst of the many blessings he has given us.

²These phrases are from Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*.

³In the opening visions of Revelation, Jesus sends letters to seven churches. He tells the Christians at Sardis that it is like they are dead – they are to “wake up!” (Rev 3:1-13) They have become complacent. Jesus accuses the Laodiceans of being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm – and he is prepared to spit them out of his mouth! (3:14-22) Tepid approaches toward God will be overwhelmed by the ways of the world.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 7:7-11 Remember God, always knowing that what we have is his gift to us.</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 111 One of the great psalms of thanksgiving</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 15:14-21 Paul commends the churches in Rome, knowing that they are able to “instruct one another,” but he also wants to remind them of some things.</p>	<p>Day 4 Hebrews 11 The stories of great Israelite heroes of the faith, who never surrendered their faith in God or in the reality of the unseen.</p>
<p>Day 5 Hebrews 12:18-24 Look beyond what you can touch or see, to the reality of God’s kingdom (Mt. Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are you in a Sunday morning class? If not – try one!

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 150 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Remembering God . . . it seems so straight-forward, so easy. It is not. Sure, we might be able to say grace before meals and come to church each Sunday. But remembering God, as Moses spoke of it, meant centering one's life upon God, in all moments and in all places. I think that is what Paul means when he speaks of praying without ceasing. Paul knew that we can't spend our entire day on our knees, but he knew that for most of us, it can be hard to give God more than a passing thought. You might begin your discussion or reflection by considering what it really means to be immersed in God, to center your life upon him. For example, it might mean seeing each person we meet as bearing the image of God – try that in the mall sometime! It might mean going into each business meeting asking ourselves . . . what would God really want me to do in this meeting? You might also make a list of the major obstacles we face as we try to remember God in the "real world."
2. ¹⁷*Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth."* Wow, that verse is a conversation stopper. I'm convinced that this is the sort of Bible verse to which we often pay lip service, but rarely let seep into our souls. I was brought up on a gospel of self-reliance and achievement, as if to scream out "I **am** the master of my ship; darn right it is by my hand . . . who else do you think it was!?" Somehow, we have to figure out how to hang on to the goodness of hard work and accomplishment but still acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God. I bet that most of us would like to trust God more and cling less tightly to our bank accounts. We'd like to believe Jesus when he says "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." (Matthew 5:25). But we lack the spiritual resources to actually do so. How can we begin to wear our wealth lightly, to be more generous, and to place our security in God's hands rather than our own?