



27 January 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:	75	“From all that dwell below the skies”
	728	“O God, you search me and you know me”
	154	“Come, divine Interpreter”
	686	“Jesus, Lord, we look to thee”
	264	“Make way, make way, for Christ the King”

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Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21,

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### How to re-member: God’s purpose in memory

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, guide us to hear and see and know your presence and purpose in the scripture today. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight o Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Not for nothing Jesus begins and ends public ministry in the account we have today in Luke by going to memory of his people – our people – he unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – and I quote – Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to give good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the end of oppression.

Jesus did not just announce this memory as a promise, or as the past glory of a once great people, but said TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled.

He began his ministry here in Luke by going to the memory of his people, and he would end his ministry similarly around a table with friends – breaking bread and pouring wine saying do this in remembrance of me. Handing the memory on.

Some folk on Facebook do what they call throwback Thursday – that is, on a Thursday they post an old photo or memory. And recently Facebook itself in the mystery of its algorithms, has been inviting some users to post pictures of themselves from now and ten years ago – how we have changed, all of us! I’ve been very impressed that most of the Methodist ministers I see have actually been aging backwards! Ten years ago I had short hair and rimless invisible glasses – fewer laugh lines.

What did you look like ten years ago? What did you hope for?

Because first and foremost, God re-members us – that is, God works to put us back together, to heal us of our hurt, to knit us together – and to re-member us as a

community – to put us together when we are torn apart – and as nations, as human in creation. Indeed, this is the hope of resurrection.

In this moment of continued Brexit negotiations, of so much identity politics, on today, which is celebrated as Holocaust memorial day - it seems important to re-visit God's purpose in memory.

I've been reading about the way memory functions in our brains – especially about people who do great feats of memory, like taxi drivers who learn the knowledge - the act of memory becomes a new event, and remembering in a habitual way, over and over again actually shapes the patterns of our synaptic connections – so praying a particular prayer, or singing a particular hymn really does shape who we are, physically. Our worship, our way in church literally makes us, as spiritual people. I am talking about the words we repeat, the hymns and prayers we come to know by heart so they wear a groove in us.

It is not for nothing that sometimes long after someone has lost memory even of themselves, someone with advanced dementia, if we sing or pray familiar words, they say them right along – we who have been silent, speech forgotten, but re-membered by God.

Think about that, if you have been singing 'blessed assurance,' say, for a few years – being literally shaped by that memory enacted?

Then think too, about how any one of us may be shaped by a bitter memory, enacted again and again, because there has been no justice, or because no one has helped us move on?

A memory that still has power in our lives years later – or in the life of a nation?

Think how a nation may hold a memory that then imprisons it. Forms it. Distorts its best life. Memory need not be a prison. Can be a source of the deepest healing and Shalom. We have seen both of these things, I suspect.

And Jesus began his ministry with a work of deepest Memory.

So today I offer you some gentle reflections on God's purpose in memory – how to re-member. Pitfalls, and possibilities. So we can do the work of memory well, and together, gently – and help our world do it well – with humour and grace.

Pitfalls first -

Last week we celebrated Susanna Wesley – her 350<sup>th</sup> birthday – and we walked and prayed and sang in the streets around this neighbourhood, a public witness to our deep memory as Methodist people.

We remembered, together, and in public – to give thanks to God, but also to build our own sense of who we are. It was well done and good, and we took time to remember a few small details amidst the big things, not all easy or good, about her life and witness. The difficulty she faced exercising a ministry when women weren't

meant to. Her problems with her husband, and debt, with homelessness, with conflict.

A first pitfall where memory is concerned is to avoid doing it – even if it is hard, or contested.

So as we do the work of memory across our society, we need to talk about our shared colonial past – about racism, about anti-foreigner violence, our history of homophobia, about the ways we have and still exclude folk who don't read, or can't see, or are poor. Not to stir up or re-wound, or goodness forbid, to say as I have heard some 'it was better when none of those people were here'. We must not avoid the work of memory, but take responsibility do it well, and better.

Another deep pitfall, where memory is concerned in personal and public life is to let memory turn into an idol – end up worshipping memory instead of God. God's people are prone to this throughout the scriptures.

And as I listen to rhetoric about making a country great again, or some but by no means all of the Brexit talk of regaining sovereignty, or even to some church revival movements - as I step back and listen to some of the more sentimental whinges of my own heart, I see idols.

We all have to negotiate the memory of who we have been, as part of who we are today. Memory is a deep well for any of us to draw water from – whether painful, or joyful, or both. And as much in our history, as for ourselves as individuals – consider the memory of the holocaust, or of our colonial past. Memory is a deep well, for us to draw on – but it can be a bitter well.

Danger is that we stop at mere reminiscence, whether joyful or bitter, as if the purpose of memory is to make a memorial to a past time or situation.

Reminiscing takes us to the past and leaves us there. Re-remembering looks at the past, engages reflectively with the present, then takes us forward to the future.

How to remember well, and better?

I think that's what Jesus was doing, quoting Isaiah, and pronouncing the year of the Lord's favour. Not 'let's make us great again,' nor even 'woe is us, we have fallen so from where we were,' but 'Because of what we have known in the past, we will be confident, blessed, and courageous today.' So let the oppressed go free, the poor be fed, the lame walk. As Jill Baker said last week – shatter the expectations of the world.

And I call to mind the beginning of another ministry, at this place – John Wesley laying the foundation stone – defending Methodism from the charge of founding a new religion: (he meant separated from the church of England) '...nothing can be more remote from the truth. ... [this is the] old religion, the religion of the primitive church, the religion of the church of England, this old religion is no other than love, the love of God and of all mankind.'

In essence, remember who we are, and who God has made us. No idols, no mere reminiscence, but a new way of conserving the deepest truth of who we are. Sometimes I sit at odds with Mr Wesley, not today, in this end of the week of prayer for Christian Unity, not on this. And we do well to remember him, and his legacy. This old religion which is no other than love.

Because in this re-remembering, we have the possibility of something more than reminiscence, in Christian memory.

Jesus gives us a model in his preaching, on that far distant day - of how memory can be handled well – made present, to instruct the future. Both at the beginning of his ministry, as we hear read today, and as he hands it on to his disciples, as he will end his ministry.

We've looked at a couple pitfalls, now let's look at the possibilities in re-remembering.

*Consider the words Jesus would use at the end of his ministry – do this in remembrance of me – here English word 'remembrance' flattens the meaning of what he meant – not 'get out the holiday snaps and think how nice it was.*

*More than just a reminiscence, but a new event of Christ present at that table, and a calling him to presence here and now – in bread and wine, in a real presence **in** the bread and wine broken poured, in the community celebrated.*

*A memory become a new event, God shapes who we are, by his presence among us.*

*The possibility of real re-remembering is God with us.*

We heard words today from Isaiah, in Jesus' mouth, and also from the prophet Nehemiah – people under pressure back in the temple after exile. In the passage we heard, we eavesdrop on the people at the work of memory, reading the scripture in Worship – We are at a time when identity politics is abounding - precisely for today these verses are given! For our personal lives, life of church, nation and world.

Proper re-remembering in Christian life – following the pattern of Jesus in this passage in Luke – doesn't leave us in the past, even as it claims the deepest truths of our past – Jesus way of remembering made his ministry more engaged in the present, more free –

It would be comfortable to keep Jesus safely in the holiday snaps, not loose in the world. Keep the memory of Methodist evangelical activism, our greatness, safely lodged in the veneration of the busts of great men in our Chapel foyer, and the great women like Susanna Wesley, or Pauline Webb, when it can be loose and wild in our evangelical activism today. And each of us, getting up and out and doing our part. Today, this teaching is fulfilled, Jesus said.

Let's bring this home, make it personal. How do you hold memory?

I have a broken teacup that belonged to my grandmother. Keep it – why?

It has symbolic importance – may come a time when I dispose of it – and woe betide the one who cleaning my cupboard comes and thinks it is worthless because it does not have any practical use anymore – it reminds me of a woman I loved, and admire still, and whose values I want to make real today still, years after her death.

And woe betide me if I hang onto it at expense of being able to have a cup of tea. Memory can help us have peace with the past, it can help us include, reverence the things and stuff of our lives, without making idols of our individual memories – particular affections, joys, and pains – even my broken teacup. I can keep that teacup without having to drink from it, or make other people try to drink from it. I try to remember this when I think about what I still love about being American.

God is in the details of our memory, not consigning us to reminiscence, but offering us full on benefit of remembrance that takes us to the past, but carries us back to the present and into future.

We are people of memory – not bound into past, but adopted each one of us into the memory of God – in which nothing is lost.

I came that they may have life, and life in all abundance – Jesus says in the Gospel according to St John. Full memory that carries us to the heart of who we are – the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind – full memory carries these from being a dead letter – holiday snap of some other God for some other people – and brings Jesus' ministry alive among us.

Where reminiscence leaves us in the past with our hurt, our joy – God's purpose in memory is to make us alive and free in present, for the future! Anointed to proclaim good news to the poor! Sight to the blind! The end of oppression!

So by re-membering the deepest truths of God's love, we are free in the present, for the future – for this Jesus spoke! Now, if you read a little further you will see that even for Jesus, perhaps especially for Jesus, memory brings great conflict. But that's next week. He hasn't even made but the one sermon, and the folk come after him to kill him.

In a world that passes by that which is not fashionable, or thin enough or clever enough, the work of good re-membering brings freedom.

Finally, God's purpose in memory is to link us with all that God has done before, and will do – for our world – We as church can carry a memory of Good news into the world – not because we are better than others, or extra pious, or even that we have our own belief all sorted out – but that we say to the world God remembers you – and nothing is lost in God's love.

In a week when Parliament will again vote, in a week of earthquakes, and court cases, in a week when we have taught and wiped and cleaned and called and signed and walked, in this week as in every one we need that news Jesus proclaimed. In this week, let us not be afraid to call out, Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.