

Christmas Day, 2020
Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-12
John 1:1-18

In the name of Jesus, our God who is with us. Amen.

Have you ever contemplated the condition of humanity and wondered why God would even bother with us? The biblical narrative is one of almost immediate disappointment. After the most sublime ordering of the heavens and the earth is described, history turns human, it turns tragic, and the tragedy has yet to cease. God put a tree in the middle of the garden that would change everything. He told the first couple not to eat of the tree, but the human eye is the source of much corruption. Eve saw that the fruit was pleasing to the eye. One gets the impression that, even without the serpent, Adam and Eve would have tested the veracity of God's claim. They would have grown bored, taken creation for granted, and reached for the knowledge of all things.¹ If given the same choice, having an easier life without knowing good and evil, or having a more difficult, less innocent existence, anyone of us would have done the same. The remarkable truth of the Genesis story, like all great stories, is that it tells us, "not just what happened once, but what always happens."² You and I are very much like the first couple. This similarity is not surprising since we all have the same DNA.

This goes beyond a simple dogmatic expression. We can see ourselves in the actions of Adam and Eve: the use of reason to justify disobedience, the hiding from God, the pathetic attempts to cover the exposed truth, the shirking of responsibility, even in the way Adam blamed God for the woman. Man has continued to use reason to blame God for evil, as if God has not given us all the freedom to do what is right, to master the sin that is crouching at our doors. We have the gift of repentance, and the opportunity to turn away from sin, but we don't always do that. Rather than taking responsibility for sin and evil in the world, man blames God for evil because God granted the gift of moral choice.

Just as we have a moral DNA, an inner impulse toward rebellion that finds its origin in our first parents, we also have a theological DNA. Different traditions in Christianity tend to produce certain patterns in thinking, particular words or ideas which become central to the way in which they understand God and man's relationship to God. Our ways of thinking about God become formative to who we are. To some extent, Christianity is not so divergent as to use entirely different words among the denominations, but what the words mean can vary a bit.

For example, if we speak of confession, it will mean different things to different people in the church. In the non-denominational circles, confession may be the public confession of faith in the redemptive work of Christ. In Lutheran and Roman circles, confession is tied to absolution, and secondarily, it is a statement of belief. In other Protestant denominations, confession is entirely a matter of public confession of specific doctrine, since they have jettisoned absolution as a practice of the church. Some denominations will focus on faith, the quantity of faith one has, and the ways in which they can demonstrate that faith. In Lutheranism, faith is more akin to trust rather than a source of miracle working power; we trust that Jesus is who He says, that His promises are true, and that the gift of forgiveness is given to all men who

¹ The phrase "good and evil" is a Hebrew idiom that indicates a knowledge of all things.

² Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54.

trust in His work. The concept of being chosen and God's sovereignty have been the subject of some debate in the history of the Protestant churches. Some argue that God's absolute sovereignty makes it such that God actively sends some to hell while identifying some for salvation. This turns God into a rather capricious and arbitrary being. Of course, this is nonsense, since God wants all men to be saved, and He takes no pleasure in the death of anyone.³ One's theological vocabulary plays an important role in how they view God and how they view man. In addition to important theological words like confession, faith, and choseness, there is a central idea in Judaism which is ours by inheritance, and that is to remember. The church rarely speaks of remembrance, though this very biblical act is of primary importance in the communion liturgy. We show our belief in something by remembering it.

We celebrate the incarnation and birth of Jesus, not simply as a confession of faith, but as an act of remembrance. We recognize this Christmas Day as marking an event, not a principle to be taught and observed. There are two things about remembering in the Bible that are important to take note of. First, something does not have to be forgotten in order for it to be remembered. Second, remembering is something God does as much as man does in the Bible. Both of these aspects of remembering are in the communion liturgy; we say, "Lord, remember us in your kingdom..." and Christ tells us to "Do this in remembrance of me."

Sadly, we are human, and we are prone to forgetting. Not just forgetting because of frail memories or old age, but forgetting as an act of our own will to power. Ingratitude is the sin of forgetting what God has done. Often times, we choose to forget those very things He has told us to remember. The remembrances God commanded Israel to observe were part of the covenant God made with the people, the covenant to which they agreed. God commands remembrance, which would be an odd expectation if it were just a function of being able to call to mind the facts of an event. God expected the events to be remembered through participation in the events, because the events were timeless, extending forward to a thousand generations. "Remember the day you stood before the Lord at Horeb..."⁴ when He revealed His instruction to you. "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."⁵ "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years..."⁶ "Remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth and so confirms His covenant which He swore to your ancestors."⁷ Then, most interesting for our purposes today, Moses says, "Remember this and never forget how you aroused the anger of the Lord your God in the wilderness. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the Lord."⁸

Forgetting what God has instructed us to remember is a choice, a rebellious one. Forgetting is an act of neglect through willful non-observance. The command to remember echoes again and again and again in Deuteronomy, more than any other book of the Torah. God understands something of our psychology. He knows that there is a constant temptation to will to forget. To curb this tendency to forget, God gave the command to put tassels on the corners of one's garments saying, "You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the

³ 1 Timothy 2:4; Ezekiel 18:32

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:10

⁵ Deuteronomy 5:15

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:2

⁷ Deuteronomy 8:18

⁸ Deuteronomy 9:7

commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.”⁹ Unfortunately, the utility of this practice has been lost on the church, though it is pretty effective at reminding people of the reality of God’s commands and His presence among His people.¹⁰ Adam and Eve saw that the fruit was good, and went after the lusts of their hearts and eyes. We, in keeping with their DNA, have frequently done the same, willfully forgetting the commands of God for the sake of our pursuit of the lusts of our hearts and eyes, prostituting ourselves to pleasure, greed, pride, convenience, or safety.¹¹ We have grown so accustomed to forgetting as a coping mechanism for guilt and shame that we have convinced ourselves there would be no happiness, hope, or pride without forgetfulness.¹²

God has a different mechanism for dealing with our guilt. The solution to our problem of forgetting God is for God to remember us. After the waters of the flood covered the earth, God remembered Noah and his family and even the animals, demonstrating a concern for all of creation. God promises to remember the covenant He made with Noah.¹³ God remembers the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and liberates the children of Israel from captivity.¹⁴

Ironically, part of the solution to sin requires God to remember humanity by forgetting sin. “Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me...”¹⁵ With the prophet Habakkuk, we pray that God would remember mercy over and above His wrath.¹⁶ We pray with Isaiah that God would not remember our sins forever.¹⁷ The event which makes all this forgetting possible is what we remember today. It is only made possible by the infinite Word becoming flesh because God remembered mankind, and came to dwell among us to seek and save the lost. In the Word made flesh, God helps His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy.¹⁸

It is a bit too romantic to think of Christmas as only marking the event of Christ’s birth. That is not the only event we remember on this glorious morning. We mark the redemption of mankind which came not only through God becoming man, but by this Holy Child becoming the Man who would be forsaken, forgotten by God, so that our sins would be remembered no more, separated as far from us as the east is from the west.¹⁹

Christ came to give us a new DNA, to redeem our corrupt cells from slavery to sin and renew a right spirit within us. He came to make us bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh, to

⁹ Numbers 15:39

¹⁰ On occasion, I have seen an orthodox Jew with the fringes of his garment showing, and I immediately thought of God and His Torah.

¹¹ When I say “safety”, I have in mind Herman Sasse, who was a strong critic of Nazism prior to 1934, but later called the openly anti-Nazi Confessing Church “the worst sect to have ever set foot on the soil of German Protestantism” (Quoted from Metaxas’ work on Bonhoeffer, 287). Though never a supporter of the Nazis, his criticism of the Nazi Party decreased as the party gained power and increased its violence against opponents of the regime.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35.

¹³ Genesis 8:1; 9:15

¹⁴ Exodus 2:24; 6:5

¹⁵ Psalm 25:7

¹⁶ Habakkuk 3:2

¹⁷ Isaiah 64:9

¹⁸ Luke 1:54

¹⁹ Psalm 103:12

give us His righteous DNA, and to overcome the forgetfulness of man with a demonstration of love so dramatic it cannot be forgotten. He takes the sin of man upon Himself, into His very being, His infinite being, and He renders it powerless, leaving it upon the cross. And as God did not forget Noah when the flood waters brought an end to virtually all life, so too did He not forget His Son in the grave, but called Him out of the flood of man's sin. "Where are you, my Son?" Unlike Adam, who was asked this question in separation and isolation, Jesus is the new man with the new DNA of righteousness who is unashamed to stand before His Father, bearing the trophies of man's salvation in His crucified flesh. The greatest tragedy of mankind became the greatest victory.

When God does big things, they are events that transcend space and time. God revealed His Holy Torah to Israel at Sinai as described in Exodus 19. The English translations lose something critical. Rashi, the most widely respected Hebrew commentator among Jews, notes that when the text says the children of Israel were at Sinai, it says "on this day". It should have used "on that day" since it was relating events that had already happened. Rashi says that the present tense is used because Torah should always be studied "as if it was given today."²⁰

Now, in former times, God spoke to His people from the clouds of Sinai, then through the prophets, but now He has spoken to us through His Son. The rabbis anticipated this: "We have the Torah. In the messianic age, we will have the Crown of the Torah."²¹ The Word incarnate, the living Torah, speaks to us today, and we must learn to approach His Word with a sense of wonder, as if we are hearing it anew. When Jesus tells us, "Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink, this is my blood of the covenant..." and He tells us to do this in remembrance of Him, these are words we do not tire of hearing. We do not tire because this big thing which God has done, is that which He continues to do in remembrance of us as we do this in remembrance of Him. Why does God bother with humanity? Because He has not forgotten us.

Religious remembrance is the present attachment to sacred events. Remembrance is part of our theological DNA. Our attachment is seen in the way in which we celebrate events.²² We do not celebrate with creed alone, but with reading the living Word and participating in the timeless Eucharistic Feast. So, let us celebrate the incarnation this day, the event that means God is always with us; let us remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead; and let us not forget all that God has done for us.²³

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁰ Rashi, *Exodus* (Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll, 1999), 220.

²¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1955), 264.

²² *Ibid.*, 213.

²³ 2 Timothy 2:8