

**“The Reason to Remember” Isaiah 43:16-21**

**Wouldn't it be great to have a perfect memory?**

**To be able to recall names and faces and phone numbers instantly?**

**To always be sure where you laid your keys?**

**To never forget your appointments?**

**To be certain about birthdays and anniversaries?**

**To remember the exact way to get to some place even if you haven't been there in many years?**

**To be able to repeat passages from a book or lines from a movie or entire conversations word for word?**

**Wouldn't that be great?**

**Maybe.**

**But maybe, it would not.**

**Some years ago, National Public Radio broadcast a story that points out the possible downsides of remembering everything.<sup>1</sup> They reported about a woman who lives in California identified only as “AJ” to protect her privacy. And AJ has what might be considered a perfect memory.**

**Scientists have tested her thoroughly over the last few years. And they discovered that she vividly recalls every little detail of what happened in her life and in the world on each day of the last 40 years or so.**

**Her mind is like a film projector or a VCR. Apparently, she can replay the past just like you or I would rewind a movie. Give her any date and she can tell you what day of the week it was. And usually, she can tell you what the weather was like on that day, personal details of her life at that time, and any major news events that occurred on that day.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5350362> and <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5352811>

**For example, when scientists questioned AJ about August 16, 1977, she knew immediately that that was the day when Elvis Presley had died. But she could also tell them that June 6, 1978 was the date when a tax initiative was passed in California and that May 25, 1979 was the date of a plane crash in Chicago.**

**Experts at the University of California at Irvine have determined that she isn't using any special tricks to remember all this stuff. Nor is she a savant, like Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Rain Man*, someone who is able to remember things about one specific area of knowledge. The only explanation that they have is that she simply possesses an extraordinarily sharp memory.**

**A reporter once asked AJ if she thought of her memory as a gift. And she replied that sometimes, she did. But not always.**

***"To remember, like, the end of every relationship ..."* she said. *"It's hard."***

**According to her, a perfect memory isn't always a perfect blessing. There is a danger in remembering everything.**

**Imagine remembering perfectly every unkind word anyone ever said to you.**

**Imagine remembering every sin you have ever committed, every mistake you ever made.**

**Imagine seeing something horrifying or disgusting on television and not being able to put it out of your mind. Ever.**

**Imagine replaying painful and traumatic events over and over and over again inside your head. Being picked on and bullied at school. A terrible car accident. A heated argument with your spouse. The horrors of war. The death of a loved one.**

**Imagine never being able to leave anything behind you.**

**Imagine how difficult life would be.**

***Forget the former things,* says the prophet in our Old Testament reading this morning. *Do not remember them. Do not dwell on the past. Consider not the things of old.***

**It's a countercultural command for most of us. We are taught to have a great respect for tradition. We feel that it is important to remember. To know where we come from. To know our history.**

After all, as the saying goes, those who do not learn from history are, what? **Right. Doomed to repeat it.**

The rallying cry of oppressed and wounded people all over the globe is that we must **“never forget”**.

*Never forget* how millions of Jews were slaughtered in Nazi concentration camps.

*Never forget* how millions of Africans were bought and sold as property during the days of slavery.

*Never forget* how Native Americans were pushed off their lands and almost destroyed completely.

*Never forget* how Union soldiers burned their way through southern cities during the Civil War.

*Never forget* how terrorists rammed planes into the Pentagon in D. C. and the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11.

So it sounds very strange to our ears to be told that what we are to do is to forget.

This word from Isaiah also seems to run counter to the general message of the scriptures. Time and time again, the Israelites are encouraged not to forget but to remember.

At the Passover, when the Lord brought them out of Egypt, Moses commanded them to *remember* that day and celebrate it as a festival and a lasting ordinance.

In Deuteronomy, they are instructed repeatedly to *remember* that they were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord had set them free.

The Psalms urge them to *remember* all the wonders and miracles God has done.

Even the book of Isaiah, just four chapters later on, just about contradicts itself pleading with them to *remember* the things of old, those of long ago.

And even here, Isaiah invites them to *remember* the Lord by calling to mind the events of the Exodus.

***Remember* how the Lord made a way through the waters.**

***Remember* how he defeated the armies of Pharaoh.**

***Remember* how he snuffed out their chariots and horses.**

**On the one hand, it was vitally important that the children of Israel remember what the Lord had done for them back at Sinai. At the time when the prophet spoke these words, the people were in exile. The Babylonians had invaded their land and left their home and their temple in ruins. Their troops had swept through Jerusalem and removed the people.**

**For decades, the Israelites had been forced to live, work, and worship in a land that was not their own. They were held captive. And perhaps, they had started to feel as if there was no way out of this.**

**Perhaps, they had started to settle down in Babylon. Perhaps, they felt as if they should just go ahead and make the best of it. Perhaps, they had decided to make themselves comfortable there where they were. Perhaps, they could adapt to life in exile and make themselves at home in this foreign land.**

**They needed to remember. To remember who their God was. To remember who they were.**

**Yet this prophet understood that they also needed to know *why* they were called to remember. There was a reason for remembering.**

**And that reason was not to look back. It was to look forward.**

**The reason for remembering was not to dwell in the past. The reason that they were to remember was so that they could have hope for the present and the future.**

**They were told to remember not to increase feelings of nostalgia within them. They were told to remember in order to create a sense of expectation.**

**The emphasis here is not so much on the past as it is on the future. There is talk about what God has done only so that we can notice what God is still doing.**

**The stress is not on the things of old, but on the new thing that God is doing.**

This prophet promises that the Lord is not finished. The Lord is still at work. God is alive and active even now. Even here.

Isaiah refers to what the Lord has done in the past as the *former things*. But that phrase could also just as easily be translated the *first things*.

I like that translation a little better. What the Lord has done in the past is just the *first things*. And if something is first, then there needs to be a second and a third and fourth and so on and so on.

To look back and remember when the Lord made a way in the sea is just to remember the *first time* because the Lord still makes a way through the sea.

When the Lord drew out and conquered armies and horses and chariots back then, it was just the *first time*, but it wouldn't be the only time that the Lord would conquer those forces that threaten his children.

When the Lord gave them water in the wilderness, it was just the *first time*. And so, they could look forward to how the Lord would continue to refresh and nourish his people.

In one of his novels, William Faulkner once wrote that the past is never dead. It's never even past.<sup>2</sup> And that really sums up what Isaiah is getting at here.

The God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt *at the first* was now going to deliver them from the Babylonians.

The One who had saved them from distress *at the first* would now save them once *again*.

Just as the Lord had *first* led them out of slavery, the Lord would *again* lead them out of exile.

Just as the Lord had held back the waters of the Red Sea for his people to cross over, so the Lord would *again* create a pathway through the desert for them to return to Jerusalem.

Just as the Lord had *first* brought them into the Promised Land, so the Lord would *now* bring them back home.

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<sup>2</sup> *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951.

**They are told to remember so that they might remember the kind of God they have in the Lord. A God of deliverance. A God of salvation. A God who is not dead. A God who is not past.**

**They are told to remember so that they can recognize the ways that the Lord is at work in their own lives. So that they could perceive the new thing that God was doing. The new ways that he would set them free. The new ways that he would continue to bless them.**

**The danger, of course, is that it is always tempting to limit God to the past. The stories of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings may have begun to sound like fairy tales.**

*Once upon a time, God saved us.*

*Once upon a time, God delivered us.*

*Once upon a time, God made a way out for us.*

*Once upon a time, God acted.*

**But the scriptures are not fairy tales. And the Lord is not a *once upon a time* God.**

**The Lord is a here and now God. God is not past tense, but present tense. A God who is not dead but alive. A God who is still among us today. A God who continues to work in free and astonishing ways. A God who releases the captives and restores people to health.**

**If only we have eyes to see it.**

**Have you ever heard of an actor or actress having a problem with being typecast? Being typecast is one of the potential downsides of having a hit movie or television show. The audience loves someone so much in a certain role that they can't seem to accept the person in a different role. They are stuck on that one particular performance. They just can't seem to see beyond it.**

**It has happened to several Hollywood stars. Leonard Nimoy is automatically associated with Mr. Spock on the old *Star Trek* series. Clayton Moore will always be the *Lone Ranger* to many people. Henry Winkler has never really been able to escape the shadow of Fonzie from *Happy Days*.**

**But perhaps, the most notable victim of typecasting was George Reeves. If you remember George Reeves, it is probably from the old *Superman* television show that ran**

back in the 1950s. In fact, he became so closely identified with the character of Superman that producers and directors were reluctant to use him in anything else.

There is a rumor that several of his scenes in one movie were cut out after test audiences kept shouting *“Hey look, it’s Superman!”* every time he appeared on the screen. He was still doing good work as an actor.<sup>3</sup> But sadly, no one could see it because everyone was so fixated on what he had done in the past.

Isaiah realized that we can treat the Lord the same way. We can typecast God. We can devote so much attention to what God has done that we neglect to notice what God is doing.

Isaiah wanted everyone to see that God was still doing good work. God is still doing the work of deliverance. God is still doing the work of salvation. No one needs to look back to see it.

We need only to look around us. For the salvation God offers is always present tense. It is never just past.

The Lord is the One who makes a path for us leading us every day of our lives. The Lord is the One who refreshes us and restores us as we wander in the wilderness of this world.

Isaiah points to the future for God is always striving to set people free. Striving to release us from anything that holds us captive.

Our fears and our anxieties.

Our illnesses and addictions.

Delivering us from evil.

From whatever threatens to destroy us.

From whatever keeps us from being the people we were created to be.

A truly perfect memory calls attention to yesterday without losing sight of today and tomorrow. Isaiah invites the church to recall what God has done so that our eyes will be open to all that God is doing here and now. Not to talk about or think about the way things used to be but to look ahead to what can be or will be. Not to talk about or think about the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://kupps.malibulist.com/2018/01/05/the-ghost-of-george-reeves/>

**things God used to do but to look forward in joyful anticipation of what new thing God will do tomorrow.**

**Faulkner was right. The past is *not* dead. The past is not even past. The same God who was at work then is at work among us in this place. And that is our reason for remembering.**

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