

“Don’t Forget”
Deut. 4:1-2; 6-9
August 29, 2021
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Saying goodbye and saying hello are often done together.

Or at least - - saying them often comes - - in close proximity - - in time.

We live most of our lives - - going along in between them.

Then something happens - - and we say goodbye to some people, and hello to others.

I remember returning home from a year living in England. Home wasn’t really all that bad - - but compared to the experiences of England - - high tea in Oxford - - the accents - - the scenery - - London and Big Ben...it was a little dull.

Part of what I remember was saying goodbye to friends I had made...

People who had known ME as me. / Apart from my parents for a year...

And now there they were: my parents.

Time to say “Hello”.

How would I explain all that had happened?

My old friends from Iowa seemed different somehow.

Moving from one town to another is similar.

Even coming home from a long vacation - - or a mission trip - - involves this tension.

Or maybe even - - this Covid experience - - and how we balance isolation and safety.

The old Beatles song captured it too:

“Hello, goodbye...you say goodbye and I say hello...”

There is a similar tension between remembering and forgetting.

In the book “The Ethics of Memory” a man and woman offer competing ideas about memory and how we deal with the past - - as we move forward. / This is a significant conversation in the Jewish community when thinking about the events of the Holocaust. In the example at the opening of the book, the woman says:

“The Jews were destroyed.

What is left is just a REMNANT of a great people.

What remains for Jews is to form communities of memory.

To serve as candles that burn in memory of the dead.”

The man counters her perspective with the opposite:

“The remaining Jews are NOT candles.

It’s terrible to live just for the sake of retaining a memory of the dead.

Better to create a community that thinks about the future.

We should live in the present.”

So remembering and forgetting are often in tension.

It’s true in examples closer to home as well: How do we live our lives after we lose someone we love - - how do we honor their memory - - without getting stuck in the past?

When we graduate from school - - can we use what we have learned?

In order to live with the wisdom we gained - - we have to remember it.

But we can’t just sit around and remember our high school glory days either.

So there is a tension there.

There is a tension between remembering and forgetting.

And there’s a tension between saying goodbye and saying hello.

These tensions are central to the scripture reading this morning.

In the Old Testament reading for today, Moses stands on the brink of the Promised Land. Moses encourages the Hebrew people to remember.

And at the same time - - he prepares to say goodbye.

The beginning of the book of Deuteronomy picks up at the end of Moses' life. Essentially it is a record of the sayings and sermons of Moses. / The book of Exodus ends before the Hebrews come to the so called "Promised Land". / Moses' life has been devoted to leading them in the wilderness.

Standing on the brink of entering this land - - Moses encourages them NOT to forget - - all they have been through - - and how God has been with them. / Moses will NOT go with them into this future. / But maybe some of the things they learned together - - will go with all of them.

As I read this text I wondered about a current day analog for the Promised Land.

What was it - - that WE were just on the brink of?

Where did God's promise lie for us?

One thing that occurred to me was: the Blackberry bushes!

That empty lot that you can all see through the three glass windows of the sanctuary. / That empty lot - - unused for decades except as a dumping place for yard debris - - might be a land of promise.

Before you decide - - let me explain a little more what I mean.

Over the years I've been at Plymouth we have debated what if anything to do with that empty lot and that land. / A number of things have been discussed - - but ONE thing has changed recently. / A few years ago Presbytery quietly changed a rule about how money gained from the sale of land is used.

It used to be that if you sold property it had to support capital improvements or be used to buy more property. / The estate of the church - - is held in trust by the Presbytery - - and that is the rule. / You couldn't sell property and use the money to support program or mission. / Property for property was the rule.

Not any more.

The new rule allows for the sale of property to support mission.

It's a huge change.

Think of all the mission you might like to do but not know how to support financially. / Now you have a way - - just out that window....

The difference between that land and the land of Canaan - - in my example - - is that in the Old Testament - - the Hebrews entered the land of Canaan to take it over.

There were conflicts and wars. / People fought and died.

The blackberry bushes are different.

They are the Promised Land - - NOT as a place to occupy and conquer and build on - - but as a resource to use - - and essentially - - to give away - - in service of the love of God and the mission of service to others - - to which we are called.

Whatever you all decide to do - - there will be details to work out.

Decisions will need input from lots of people.

I'm not really saying what you should do.

And I'm not going to be here - - with you - - in any case.

But when I came here 8 years ago the rules about LAND were different in the Presbytery. / And in my time we have done a lot of cooperative - - community ministry and service. / I hope that has paved the ground for something...

Years ago someone made me a set of tablets - - that look like the 10 commandments.

The ones Moses received from God.

So I could - - pretend to be Moses - - at Bible School one summer.

An image I'd like you to ponder - - is this one:

Here I stand today - - holding these tablets - - looking out these windows - - at those blackberry bushes - - and wondering. / I've done my best to lead you through the past 8 years. / But like Moses - - I say GOODBYE now.

Goodbye - - but also - - don't forget.

Remember.

Remember what good God has done...

And SO - - HOPE for what good God can do!

I say goodbye - - but you will say HELLO - - to all kinds of things in a new future. / A future that we barely imagined 8 years ago.

Moses main concern in Deuteronomy was that the people would forget.

And if they forgot who God had been - - they would abandon God.

It had happened before.

The Golden Calf incident still smoldered in recent memory.

Don't forget what you have learned - - Moses said.

Mostly - - don't forget - - who you are - - and who God is.

When you forget who God is - - basically you remake God.

Don't remake God in the image of what you wish God was...

Instead remember who God really is:

A God who takes the side of the poor enslaved people - - and sets them free..

Langston Hughes has written a poem about this called: "Gods"

"The ivory gods,
and the ebony gods,
and the gods of diamond and jade,
 Sit silently on their temple shelves,
 while the people are afraid.

Yet the ivory gods and the ebony gods,
and the gods of diamond and jade,
are only silly PUPPET gods,
 that the people THEMSELVES
 have made."

Remember the Bible study we have done together.

Remember the way we have served others - - and WHY we did that.

Remember what we have learned about WHO God really is.

Remember the forgiveness and the mercy and the healing that you have experienced.

When you say hello to the future...

Let THAT be your guide.