

"MEMORIES"

Date: May 27, 2007

Text: Deuteronomy 34: 1-8

Memorial Day weekend ideally is all about memories, memories of people from the military, home, work who touched our lives deeply. Apart from our Lord, who appears to stand out in the Biblical memory? I would say that Moses dominates as the Great Liberator of God's people. The Bible remembers his humble beginnings: born to a Hebrew family in Egypt, hidden in the bulrushes to avoid being killed, discovered by Pharaoh's wife and raised in the royal Egyptian court, angered by treatment of a fellow Hebrew as a young man he kills a soldier and has to flee. He is content to tend his father-in-law's sheep but God has bigger plans. Moses tries to make innumerable excuses but finally sets forth to lead his people from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh gives him a hard time and plagues invade the land. Finally the people are freed and Moses sets forth into the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. On the way, he receives the 10 Commandments. As we read in our morning lesson, his life ends with a glimpse of the Promised Land but he never reaches his goal.

But is that the entire story? What is so marvelous about biblical heroes is that their lives capture the both/and quality of memories: looking back can bring warm, fuzzy feelings but there also can be some disappointments. Rough edges abound in Moses' life: anger and lashing out, reluctance to follow God's leading, a lack of faith, never quite measuring up to expectations. The biblical heroes are never plaster saints but flesh and blood people who like all human beings had their weaknesses.

I worry when people attempt to "bury" unpleasant memories because we need to deal with all that has happened in our relationships. That's why Moses' life is such an excellent model: he is glorified for his accomplishments and yet there is an awareness that all was not accomplished that might have been. Surely most of our recollections are this curious blend of good feelings and disappointments. When we are honest and look at our memories more realistically, affirming what was good and what might have been better, than memories can play an important part in shaping who we are.

Realistic memories are always richer than artificial ones. I confess to a certain degree of uneasiness at memorial services these days when people get up and share very personal reflections regarding the life of the deceased. Part of my concern is that God often seems to be forgotten in praising the individual and, secondly, such idealistic portraits seldom express the true feelings that people need to deal with not only immediately following a death but also in months and years to come. An old story about two people leaving a memorial service for a co-worker in which the pastor had lavished great praise upon the deceased shows how easy it is not to see the whole picture. One says, "You can't blame the pastor for that glowing tribute. He never had to work with the guy." In contrast, looking at Moses' life honestly, his willingness to follow the Lord becomes even more inspiring and his courage midst adversity becomes even more impressive. The memory of Moses is cherished among all Biblical people because he was ever so human and yet was used powerfully by the Almighty.

In the same vein, we remember loved ones today. We don't have to put aside arguments or struggling moments but in including everything the richness of our memories becomes even greater. One of my most treasured privileges as a pastor has been sitting at many a kitchen table in times of loss and remembering family experiences together. People tell all sorts of stories: some are sad, some are funny, some lift up good points, other incidents reflect darker times but together it is this collection of stories that becomes so very important in enabling the grieving family members to pick up the pieces and begin to move forward.

Memories are the stuff upon which we build for tomorrow. We can laugh at some of the things that happened, sometimes there are tears in thinking of other experiences but as we reflect there is a growing sense of closeness and sharing and hope around that table. As the Biblical writers thought about Moses so we do the same regarding people who impacted us along the journey of life. And as with them, there comes in these times of recollection and reflection a great sense of how our Maker guides us through the good and not so good times. It is this remembrance of God's presence, the gift of the Holy Spirit that supports individuals and families as they rebuild their lives.

It is too bad that this weekend has become primarily a time for travel, putting the docks in, getting the gardens ready, etc. Not bad activities but in our hectic world time is required to pause and remember people who have touched our lives and shaped who we are and that is what we are doing in worship. We might be thinking of a friend from the military service or a teacher or family member or someone in this church who helped mold our very being. Each of us in our own way has memories of all of these individuals, times of intimacy and joy shared together. These are precious memories. Never blot them out. Continually lift them up to God. It is upon these memories, not just of people but also of God's presence in all that has been, that become the cornerstone for moving into the future.

Some of you will remember a time before cell phones and even before dialing numbers when there was an operator at the other end of the line each time you picked up the phone. Here is a true story from "long ago" that emphasizes the preciousness of memories

When I was quite young my family had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember the polished old case fastened to the wall. I was too little to reach the telephone but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she didn't know. My personal experience with this miracle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the workbench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible but there seemed no point in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy.

I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger and then I saw the telephone. I ran for the footstool and unhooked the receiver and said into it, "Information Please," Soon a small voice came on, "Information." "I hurt my finger," I wailed into the phone. "Isn't your mother home?" "Nobody's home but me." "Are you bleeding?" No, I hit my finger with a hammer and it hurts." "Can you open the icebox?" I said I could. "Chip off a little bit of ice and hold it to your finger."

After that I called Information for everything. For help with geography, with my math, what a chipmunk I caught in the park would eat. I even called her when my pet canary died. I moaned, "why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?" She sensed my deep anguish and responded, "always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Another day I asked her how you spell "fix."

When I was nine we moved across country to Boston. I missed my friend, "Information Please," very much. In moments of doubt I would recall the sense of security I had in talking to Information. A few years later on my way to college out west my plane put down in Seattle. Almost without thinking, I dialed information and miraculously heard the same small voice. I heard myself saying, "How do you spell fix?" There was a long pause and then, "I guess your finger must have healed by now." I laughed. "I wonder if you know how much you meant to me during that time?" "I wonder how much you meant to me since I never had children. I really looked forward to your calls."

Three months later I was back in Seattle and called Information again. A different operator answered. I asked for the old operator and sadly learned she had died five weeks ago. Before I could hang up she said, "Did you say your name was Paul?" "Yes," I answered. "Well, she has been sick for some time but she left a message for you in case you called. Let me read it to you. "Tell him there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

Memories. God-filled memories .