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*Nostalgia and Hope*  
Psalm 137; Hebrews 3:7-14

Somehow, holiday gatherings and celebrating the beginning of a new year has a way of conjuring up a world of nostalgia. Someone has said, "Nothing is more responsible for the 'good old days' than a bad memory." Another bit of wisdom advises, "It's never safe to be nostalgic about something until you're absolutely certain there's no chance of its coming back." Will Rogers had a way of bottom-lining everything: "Things ain't what they used to be and probably never was."

Somewhere in his writings, St. Augustine observed that a certain form of nostalgia ought to be regarded as a mortal sin. Obviously, he was thinking about how a certain way of remembering the past can cast a shadow on the present and stifle hope for the future. If we aren't careful, the "good old days" can become the enemy of "the rest of the days." Augustine was right in warning against this form of nostalgia, for nothing can demoralize life any quicker than a sick relationship to the past. Gathering on the first Sunday in the New Year might be a worthy time to consider our relationship with the past.

A good illustration of how corrupting this form of nostalgia can be is found in the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm that was read just earlier. Written by an unnamed Jewish exile, it reflects the horror of watching the armies of Babylon as they swept over Jerusalem and leveled everything, including the fabled Temple of Solomon. Many were killed in this invasion and those left, like this author, were deported into a strange land where everything was different. It is inevitable in such a circumstance that people would exercise the gift of memory, but how should this be done?

Like most circumstances, we have a choice. If we will, our gift of memory can be put to positive use by allowing it to instruct and inspire. For example, these exiles could have remembered how Israel had been warned again and again about the very things that just had happened. For two hundred years, far-sighted prophets had been telling the Chosen People that they were on a

“collision course” with disaster. Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah had gone to great lengths to point out that Israel had lost touch with the Covenant of Sinai and its vision of a humane and dynamic society. The Ten Commandments set forth a way to live so that individuals could come to fulfillment and the whole society prosper. But over the years, this way of life degenerated into the age-old polarity of the few who are very rich and the many who are poor. Such a maldistribution of wealth has a way of weakening everyone in a society. The rich so pamper themselves that they become flabby and weak, while the poor are so demoralized that they grind themselves down with bitterness. Ultimately, their downfall came from internal decay.

Someone once defined the difference in the foolish and the wise at this very point. The foolish individual is one who will only learn from his or her own experience, whereas the wise individual is willing to learn from the experience of others. In other words, if memory is used constructively, we do not have to make the same mistakes over and over again. Nor do we have to make the obvious mistakes that other people have made and for which they have suffered. The essence of wisdom is learning how “to fail forward.” This is the process of taking the experience of the past and letting it teach us about the future.

The other way that memory could have been a positive tool to these exiles is in offering them hope. This was not the first time descendants of Abraham had found themselves in exile or under oppression. Centuries before, the sons of Jacob had found themselves enslaved in Egypt. Through the leadership of Moses, God had led them out. This event of liberation became the foundation on which the faith of Israel was built, and obviously, it offered hope to people in difficult situations. If God is a Liberator and Deliverer—if Egyptian oppression was not too difficult to overcome—what could the future hold under any circumstance? It was this kind of history that removed the word “impossible” from their lexicon of faith. There was, even for those exiles in Babylon, a way to remember that could have been very positive.

However, as Psalm 137 shows they chose the opposite direction. They let the gift of memory degenerate into the kind of nostalgia that St. Augustine warned against. Instead of relating to the past in ways that made them better, they let their memory make them bitter. They did what is always a temptation

when looking backwards—they glorified the past rather than trying to learn from it.

Another thing that this use of memory did to the Psalmist was to turn him to hopelessness about the present and the future...and therefore to anger and hostility. Whenever a person concludes that the past is infinitely superior to whatever may come, then it is easy to bog down into destructive despair. This is where creativity stops and hostility takes over. This is what nostalgia turned sick can drive people to say. He relished the thought of seeing the Babylonians go through what they had done to the Israelites. He even went so far as to say that it would delight him if some invader would come and take Babylonian babies by the heels and dash their brains out against the rocks—which actually happened in ancient wars of extermination. It expressed the height of brutality, which this kind of dead-end nostalgia can produce.

The writer of Psalm 137 had allowed the very thing to happen to him that the writer of the letter of Hebrews was warning against. Hebrews recreates the image of the Exodus experience. God had delivered Israel out of Egypt and was leading them through the wilderness toward the promised land. At first, they had been excited about this new prospect, but when they got out into the new demands of the venture, some of them began to look back longingly to the security of Egypt. In the words of the writer of Hebrews, “they hardened their hearts.” What this means is that they stopped hoping. They no longer regarded what God wanted for them to experience in the future. According to the writer of Hebrews, this is the sin above all sins—to despair, to conclude that what God did in the past is superior to what God can do in the future, to think that God has run out of resources and ingenuity, and that the best has already been, rather than is yet to be.”

On this first Sunday in January, I have chosen to offer those words of challenge as we start a new year, because we have a choice in the way we relate to our future. 2008 was a difficult year for us as a nation...and was a difficult year for many of you. We must remember that the biblical picture of history never begins with perfection and declines from that point. It rather speaks of “first the seed, then the blade, then the flower.” Perfection is the goal, not the beginning point for the biblical God. The movement was upward, not

downward. Memory was the basis of hope, not despair, when Israel was at her best.

So as we begin the New Year, we are called to hope—as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a world community. There is a nostalgia that ought to be regarded as a mortal sin. To think that what has been is superior to what can be is to sin the sin of despair. God is not finished with anything yet. How can we doubt, then, the prospects of looking for the best in this new year? Here, as always, we have a choice. AMEN.

### **Hebrews 3:7-14**

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.' As in my anger I swore, 'They will not enter my rest.'" Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

### **Psalm 137**

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!