

Sermon for August 19, 2018 – “A Dangerous Place”

20th Sunday in OT, Year B – Texts: Lamentations 3:17-26; Luke 9:57-62

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“While the past is an exquisite place to visit,” says pastor Greg Morse, “it is a dangerous place to live.” How many of us spend a lot of time reminiscing about the past? If you do, it is, for the most part, okay. Thinking fondly about the past. Looking back isn’t necessarily a bad thing – until it is. You see, there’s a difference between **thinking** about the past and **living** in it. Sometimes we live in the past because it’s familiar. We know what happened. There are no surprises. It’s probably why so many people watch reruns of old TV shows or listen to the same music they listened to growing up and why they consider anything new from, say, the last 20 to 40 odd years, vastly inferior. This is what happens when we live in the past. We choose to live there because it’s familiar. We know everything that happened. When the past was really good, you can live there because just thinking back on it gives you a feeling of comfort and happiness.

Think about it. Think of the middle-aged people you know, the one’s that are always talking about their days as a high school (or college) athlete when people cheered them on and they were always on the winning teams. The retired professionals constantly reliving the days when they held important positions, did important things when they were admired and respected. The church member forever going on about the days when the pews and Sunday school rooms were filled, longing that things could be the way they used to be.

What about us? Do we live in the past? I challenge everyone to ask themselves... Do we cling to one particular time or place in the past? Do you feel that things will never be that good ever again? Are you frustrated with where you currently are in life? Are you fearful of the future? Does thinking about the past actually make you sad? If we answer “yes” to any of those questions we may be stuck in the past. But, we may ask, what’s wrong with nostalgia? It’s harmless, right? Why is it a problem?

Well, it’s a problem because it robs you of the opportunity to enjoy the present. But if you’re having issues in the present how can living in the past help? At best it’s an escape, and a temporary one at that. Think of it this way, it’s much easier to reminisce about an old flame than it is to deal with the current troubles in your marriage. It’s nicer to daydream about when you were a star athlete than it is to look at yourself in the mirror and deal with the extra weight you’re currently carrying around. If you’re finding retirement difficult it feels better to go back to a time when you were important and when people depended on you and looked up to you. What causes this unhealthy nostalgia? It seems to boil down to two things; either we don’t want to deal with the present or we’re fearful of the future. The future is fraught with uncertainty...What will happen to us? To our family? To our country? To our church? And then, of course, is the scariest questions of all; What if our best days are behind us? What if nothing in the future will ever feel as good as what has happened in the past?

All of this is proof that few things threaten **today** like **yesterday**. We were happy once. We were beautiful then. We were vital. We were somebody then. “We dreamed a dream in times gone by,” sings Fauntine in *Les Misérables*, “When hope was high and life worth living.” But God does not mean for our hearts to live in yesterday.

In the book of Lamentations from our first reading, Jeremiah reminds us that God’s mercies are new every morning. In forgetting this we can travel back in our minds to relive that season’s happiness. Today proves too disappointing. So, with glazed eyes and depressed souls we become scarecrows of our former selves who increasingly diminish from the here and now to escape to better days. Our hearts may still beat but we have stopped living.

When former blessings decay, present gratitude when God provided for us. When He gave us that job or that house, that boy/girlfriend, that success, that freedom, that meaning, and life afterward is worse for it. When we've become sour creatures that begrudge the fall and winter seasons of life because we once enjoyed the spring and summer. When we retreat into our memories we've left the safe path, driving with one eye on the rearview mirror. We've made the past a kind of god. And anytime we kneel before the past, the present becomes a curse. My pastor used to say (quoting sociologist Robert Nisbert) that nostalgia is the rust of memory. It was actually considered a psychological disorder from the late 17th century until only recently. It comes from two Greek words. The first, **nostos**, meaning to return home and the second, **algos**, meaning pain or ache. Nostalgia is a kind of homesickness for days gone by. Is it surprising then that scripture warns against it? The Book of Ecclesiastes seems to think so and there we read that we should not ask **“Why were the old days better than these? For it is not wise to ask such questions.”** Still, we ask but why **not**? Again, what's the harm?

Well, there are lots of reasons. I want to mention three.

- **First**, we're not good judges. Look at the question itself. When we ask, “Why were the old days so much better?”, we assume is that the past was, in fact better. But was it? I mean, was the past indeed better? Let's be honest, just how clear are our memories? Remember Uncle Rico from the movie, *Napoleon Dynamite*? He tells everyone that in high school he could throw a football a quarter mile, that if his coach had just put him in in the fourth quarter they'd have been state champs – no doubt! It happens to all of us; the past when worshipped and retold tends to become exaggerated. The good old days get better, achievements become loftier the farther in the past they are. Even the rougher parts can be smoothed over and remembered fondly. It's what we do. We photoshop the past in our minds. We forget the difficulties and the frustration, the pain and uncertainties we experienced then. For some reason, we remember little (if any) of that. It's always harder now, or so it seems. I say “seems” because, truth be told, we don't have all that great a perspective on the here and now. Long-time church-goers will tell stories to justify the past and verify the truth to which one theologian attested “God keeps His best wine in the cellar of suffering...and cellars can feel like jail when we are locked inside.” But as people of faith we know that God prepares a table for us amidst our sorrows, in the presence of our enemies and there, sits down to eat with us.
- The second reason not to be overly enamored of the past is a little more complicated. It's that when we wax nostalgic we, in many ways and in ways we don't realize, criticize God. Think about it. The question of why the past is better than the present is always addressed to someone and that someone is usually God. But a mature, resilient faith in God does not ask that question. As one poet writes...“Doubt/unbelief questions God and tells us to curse him and die when He takes good from us. Trust sits in the ashes.”

It says, as Job did, between sobs, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” We should, therefore, avoid asking “Why were old days better than these?” Why? Because in doing so we call God to the witness stand to give an account of Himself. We interrogate His goodness. We cross-examine His claims of benevolence. We prosecute God's providence, God's ability to provide in the here and now.

- The third reason for not living in the past is that we have more chapters yet to live. asking why the past was better casts doubt on the future, slowing down (or halting altogether) our forward progress. As we hear Jesus Himself say in our Gospel reading **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”** What He is saying is that even if our intention is to follow Him, if we take seriously the call to pick up our cross and follow Him the only way is forward. To continue to look back toward the past prevents this. We must engage in the new because while life can only be **understood** backward, it can only be **lived** forward.

In the Lord of the Rings, we overhear Gandalf's advice to Frodo on his quest to destroy the one ring. Lamenting his present life away from his beloved home, the Shire, Frodo tells Gandalf: "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." Gandalf replies: "So, do all who live to see such times but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

Many experience days in which they'd not choose to live. But it's not up to us. Job, more than most, understood this. What **is** for us to decide is what we will do, each of us, with the time God has gifted us. We've more living to do, maybe more than we wanted, but not more than we ought to have. We must remember that home is ever before us and we must look ever forward to it. "When we kneel before the past," one theologian wrote, "the present becomes a curse." And so, brothers and sisters, here's the thing...God calls us to remember the past, to breed gratitude and hope for the future mercies which will extend beyond the borders of this world. But, God also calls us, as He called the ancient Israelites through the prophet Isaiah, to not "dwell on the past..." "See," says our God, "**I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.**" This is the question that confronts us, and the only question with which we should concern ourselves.

So, do we perceive it? Do we perceive the new thing that God is doing? Do we see what God's doing in our lives and in that of the church? Do we? Are we even **looking**? I believe with all my heart that we must open our eyes, that we must not sit lifeless on the sidelines looking back on the best times here. We must look forward to that new thing, for those new mercies, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises in God's future.

The Book of Revelation paints an incredible picture of that day. The day when we'll hear a loud voice from the throne saying "**See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them – they will be His peoples, and God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more – for the former things have passed away.**"

On that day all things will be made new. Until then, we wait. Until then we must renounce the empty joys of nostalgia. We must thank God for our past and place our hope in what is to come!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.