

Sermon for December 13 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4
Psalm 126
Luke 1:46-55
John 1:19-28

MEMORIES

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Our history is part of who we are now.

Here we are now on the third Sunday of Advent, and our readings this morning are all focused on the connection between the birth of Jesus and various expectations that had been integral of the Jews for many centuries of the coming arrival of a savior for the embattled nation of Israel, a man they referred to as the Messiah, which in Hebrew means The Anointed One.

One of the best articulations of that expectation from the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – was the selection from the prophet Isaiah that we read this morning, and was universally understood among the Jews to be a prophesy of the Messiah. Let me just read again from the opening of that selection:

*“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
Because the Lord has anointed Me
To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent Me to [a]heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...”*

When we move into New Testament times, we find the early Christian writers constantly appealing back to those Hebrew scriptures as their way of connecting Jesus with those earlier expectations. This is perhaps nowhere more beautifully accomplished than in the declaration that Luke places into the mouth of Mary during her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, while both still carry their babies in their wombs: Elizabeth carrying the baby who will grow into John the Baptist, and Mary with Jesus. In response to Elizabeth's assertion that her baby will be the fulfillment of all that the Lord has promised Israel, Mary bursts forth into the lovely poem that in church tradition has acquired the grand title of the Magnificat. Let me read it again.

*“My soul [i]magnifies the Lord,
47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
48 For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
49 For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.
50 And His mercy is on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
52 He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
And exalted the lowly.
53 He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich He has sent away empty.
54 He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
55 As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever.”*

Jesus himself, by the time he entered upon his ministry, knew that he was the Anointed One of God. At his first visit to his home church in Nazareth, for example, he reads the passage from Isaiah that I've just read, and declares that in him this prophesy is now fulfilled. And there are many other examples.

Or again, at the very outset of his public ministry, John announces, again borrowing a Messianic image from the Old Testament, that he himself is but the forerunner of another, of the Messiah, who is already among them.

We find that announcement in our Gospel reading for today, So let me read it now.

John 1: 19-28

This passage and the others in our readings for today all use and make reference to a prophetic tradition that had come down through the centuries and served to hold the nation together by virtue of what we might call 'national memory.' For nations have memories as do individuals, and it is those memories that give and maintain the nation's own self-identity.

I'm sure many of you have had the difficult experience of knowing someone, perhaps someone close to you, who, through the cruelty of dementia, gradually loses the memories of his or her own life. There are few things sadder than to watch those memories slowly slip away, like parts of their image being erased from a blackboard, until eventually all that remains is the blank chalkboard.

That teaches us that it is really memory that serves as the glue that holds a human life together, that gives it its own personality and individuality. And what is true of each person is also true of each country and its people. The shared memories of a community, whether they are good memories or bad memories, are what define that community, are what gives it shape and substance and vitality. To erase those memories is not to purify that community, but rather to orphan it, to cut it loose from its anchorage and set it adrift, to be battered and buffeted and redirected by whatever happens to be the strongest winds and waves of the latest storm. This is why the first aim of totalitarianism is always to erase the memories of the peoples it seeks to dominate.

The great strength of the Jewish people derives from its commitment to keep its memories alive, and that is also the great strength of our Christian religion that developed out of it. The sacraments and traditions celebrations of our faith are really nourishment for our shared memories. The most central sacrament, communion, was specifically referred to by Jesus himself as an aid to memory, but the same is also true of our regular Sunday service, of the familiar hymns we sing together, of the readings we listen to over and over, and very beautifully in our return every year to the familiar rituals of the Advent season, the Christmas carols, the nativity reenactments, the Advent candles.

And that's also why our own church's yearly Memory Star service is such a lovely addition to this Advent season of memory. What is true of a nation and of an individual is also true of a church. When we pause together as a church and reach back into our own church's shared history and bring to mind those who have preceded us and those who have shared our lives as the family of this church, we are bringing our own historical community back to life. For memory is itself a kind of resurrection.

And so today as we hang our Memory stars on our Christmas tree, we do so in the awareness that we are redrawing our own church's image on that chalkboard, that it is a lovely image, and one that deserves to be preserved, one that reinvigorates our own life today, and strengthens us as we move into the future.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is that you bless and sanctify our Memory Star service, and let it bind us to our church family's past, reinvigorate our church today, and guide us as we navigate our way into the uncertain waters into which we are sailing with Christ as our captain, in whose name we pray.