



When I travel to my hometown, I find it sad to drive or walk through downtown. My hometown was never large, but it was quite a bustling small town in my growing up years. The peak population was about 6,400 people, which was enough to support a number of businesses, before the malls and later, Amazon, came along. From my childhood until now, the population has declined by more than half, to its current population of about 2,500, and the downtown businesses are almost completely gone. When I was visiting about a year and a half ago, I took a walk through downtown, and discovered sections of town where entire blocks have nothing but shuttered buildings. It was such a sad sight to me. As I walked along, I remembered when the sidewalks were busy with shoppers and people conducting business. I remember going to the shoe stores, to the 5 and 10, to the movie theater, and many of the other businesses. I walked past my middle school, a large building sitting on the bank of the Ohio river, which now sits empty and has a For Sale sign out front. I could walk down the middle of the street for blocks and not worry about being in the path of a car or seeing another pedestrian.

Remembering is often bittersweet. The comparison of what was, and what is, can be very difficult.

I wonder what it was like for Nehemiah when he returned to Jerusalem after he and the others were allowed to return from their decades-long exile in Babylon. I don't think Nehemiah had lived in Jerusalem; I think he grew up in exile, but he had certainly heard the

stories of his homeland. I'm sure Nehemiah had heard about the beauty and majesty of the temple, I'm sure he had heard about the great walls around the city, and I'm sure he had heard about how the city of Jerusalem was filled with faith, activity, business, and so much more. When Nehemiah and the other exiles were allowed to return, I'm sure they had a very palpable sense of excitement as they journeyed, discussing among themselves how finally, after so many years, their dream of seeing Jerusalem was about to be fulfilled.

And then came the day they arrived. Imagine, how the excitement must have quickly dissipated when they saw the city. It was in ruins. When they stood and gazed upon Jerusalem for the first time, and saw the walls in a pile of rubble, the temple in ruins, and the homes and businesses gone, I'm sure they compared that scene to the stories they had been told about the city's former glory, and it must have broken their hearts. What they found was not the Jerusalem of which they had heard in so many stories.

But they set to work, rebuilding. After 52 days the walls were complete, but there was still much work to be done. Before continuing with the remainder of the work, however, Nehemiah gathered everyone together so a list could be made of all who had returned, as we will find in verse 6.

Follow along with me as I read this morning's Scripture text, Nehemiah 7:1-6 –

¹ After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed.

² I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.

³ I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."

⁴ Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.

⁵ *So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there:*

⁶ *These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town...*

You might remember that on Mother's Day my sermon was also about remembering. The title of that message was *Will We Remember?* Interesting, then, that on Father's Day I am doing another sermon about remembering. Maybe there is something unconscious in that decision; I don't know, but this is not a repeat of that message. In this message, I am going in different directions about remembering.

So let's do some remembering, shall we?

1. Remember People.

We all have a record of those people who left a profound mark on our lives. The other day, I was going through a pile of papers I had set aside in recent months, and as I was sorting through that stack of papers there was a manila envelope. As soon as I saw it, I knew without looking at the return address, who had sent it to me. It was from Fred Moffatt. Once or twice a year, in the last few years of his life, I would get a large manila envelope from Fred, and I never had to open it to discover what it contained; it was updates for the outline of his funeral. I was always happy to hear from Fred, but when I would receive one of those envelopes, I really didn't want to open it. I didn't want to look at the outline of his funeral and think about what life would be like once he was gone. I sure do miss Fred.

Nehemiah called the people together to do something rather innocuous – he wanted to make a list of the people who returned from exile. It wasn't quite a census, but he wanted a record of those who returned from exile and had come home to Jerusalem. I imagine he also had a record in his heart of those who did not return from the exile.

When I walk into this sanctuary on Sunday mornings, or any other day during the week, I think about the people who would be here, under normal circumstances. But these are not normal circumstances. I still find it a jolt to look out on these few chairs, spaced apart, with a handful of people. And though I know there are so many more who are watching online, it reminds me of this – online worship has been a gift to us during this time, but it’s not the same. It’s just not.

In our online Sunday School class we’ve been studying the book of Philippians. I find myself gravitating to that book of the Bible when life gets out of sync, and it is certainly out of sync now. There are a lot of verses in Philippians that I love. I like to underline favorite verses, and it would be simpler for me if I would just underline all the verses in Philippians. And I know I have quoted the verse many times over the years, but I find myself drawn back to it over and over again – verse 3 of chapter 1, that says *I thank my God every time I remember you*. I think of you on Sunday mornings, and I thank God for you. During the week, as I walk through the building, I think about when the hallways were busy with people and the excited voices of children. Do you know what was scheduled to begin tomorrow? Vacation Bible School. Under normal circumstances, the sanctuary and building would be decorated for VBS, and we would be ready for a large group of kids and adults to fill our space. Will you do me a favor? Will you pray for the kids who would have been here this week, and in Vacation Bible Schools in churches all over?

2. *Remember Decisions.*

I’m going to assume that we all share several things in common, and one of those is to look back to our past and wonder how different life might be if we had made some different decisions. What if we had taken one job instead of another? What if we had declined to go to a meeting or activity where we met someone who would become very important in our life? I’ve got some decisions I have pondered over the years. There are a couple of those decisions from my past I often think about, wishing I could go back in time to redo them. I would love to go back and

change my decision to trade away my 1969 Gibson Les Paul custom, a guitar that came into my possession for \$300.00. I traded it for a mid-80s pointed headed hair metal guitar. What in the world was I thinking? Why didn't someone stop me? That \$300.00 guitar is now worth into five figures. In fact, as I was talking to the owner of a guitar store a few years back, the conversation turned to guitars we let get away. I told him the story of my Les Paul, and his response was heartbreaking, as he said, *you traded away your new Mercedes*. I sure wish I could go back in time and redo that decision.

There is one decision from my past that looms large, larger than most others, and I have often wondered what would I do if I could travel back in time? Would I change that decision? Many times I have told myself, *if I could redo that decision I would do so in a heartbeat*. But when I am honest with myself (and I am like anyone else in this respect – I am not always honest with myself, as though I can fool myself) I realize that it would be a mistake to change that decision. Even though the decision brought me to some of the greatest heartbreak in my life, it also brought some of my greatest blessings. If I had not made that decision, so many amazing people would be absent from the history of my life, and so many blessings that came to my family would have never existed. So, perhaps it is a really great blessing that we cannot go back and change decisions.

We need to remember a couple of things about decisions – they have consequences, and sometimes, really, really big consequences. When we are young, we don't always realize the long-term implications and repercussions of our decisions. We think of the moment, not tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year.

When we read the Bible, what we find is that the story of God and humanity is not a straight line. God had a plan for humanity, and humanity had their own plan. God had a plan for Abraham, and Abraham had some plans of his own, and his plans created some difficulties. God promised Abraham he would be the father of a multitude (Genesis 15:5), but as he and Sarah, his wife, were getting on in years, they began to doubt that promise. Sarah convinced Abraham to

have a child with her servant, Hagar (Genesis 16:1-15). Ishmael was the child born to Abraham and Hagar, and the decision of Abraham and Sarah to make their own plan and to forsook God's promise was a decision that continues to impact world politics to this very day. That decision is one of the primary reasons why the small piece of land called Israel and the question of who owns that land has become so contentious. Jacob and Esau, sons of Rebekah and Isaac, also made their own decisions about the plan of their lives. Esau, as you will remember, came home one day very hungry. Jacob took advantage of his brother's hunger, offering him food in exchange for his birthright (Genesis 25:27-34). Esau traded away his birthright in that moment of hunger, and the repercussions of that decision followed him and his descendants for many years. David, the great king of Israel, had an affair with Bathsheba. Compounding that bad decision, David arranged for the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. David was a great king, in many ways, but some of his decisions and their sad aftermath followed him and his family for many years (Genesis 11:1-27). Peter regretted his denial of Jesus (Matthew 27:69-75). Saul/Paul regretted that, before he was converted, persecuted the church (Acts 9:1-2). If we charted out the Biblical story on a graph, the line of the story would not be straight but up and down, and it would be so because of the decisions of humanity to make their own way rather than following the plan God created for them.

As Nehemiah and the people traveled back to Jerusalem, I imagine they thought about the decisions of their forebearers, decisions that brought about the calamity of the exile.

The past informs the present and the future. Maybe we can't live in the past, and maybe we shouldn't live in the past, but let me tell you this – the past lives in the present and the future. Let me say that again – the past lives in the present and the future. Make decisions wisely.

3. Making Peace With the Past.

Of course, not everything about the past is missed. I sometimes think of the difficult periods of my life, and though I learned from them, I am

grateful those times are in my past and not my present. I do not miss, for instance, the schedule that I kept when I was in seminary. I do not miss the days of hurrying to class after only a few hours of sleep, hurrying to work after class, and then hurrying home after work to begin a long night of studying. I do not miss the financial struggle of those days, with a budget of \$15.00 for a week of groceries. When the pandemic is over, I will be very happy for it to fade into the past. When it is over, I'm going to take my collection of masks and burn them in a bonfire in our backyard, and dance in celebration around that fire.

Nehemiah and the other exiles had a lot to remember. They remembered the difficulty of their lives in exile. They remembered the people who did not live to see the return to Jerusalem. They remembered all that their homeland had been, and what it represented. And as they remembered, they mourned what no longer was.

At some point, we have to make peace with our past.

In one of my seminary classes, I witnessed a powerful example of someone making peace with their past. It was a class devoted very much to self-examination and learning why we do what we do. The reason we do what we do, in large measure, is because of our past, and how the past informs our present. I will never forget the day when the student sitting beside me came to terms with his past in such a powerful experience. As he talked to the class about his life, he told a tale of an alcoholic, abusive father. His father would physically assault his children, and this young man often hid himself and his younger siblings from their father's rage, as he searched for them throughout the house, saying he would kill them when he found them. The next day, as class began, our two professors led us through an exercise that helped the young man to let go of the pain from his past. I was seated next to him, and the relief he experienced was very powerful to witness. There has been more than one time when I have wished for such an experience, an experience that would have allowed me to make peace with my past.

Do you need to make peace with your past? It's never too late. Nehemiah and the exiles had a lot in their past, and they had to make peace with that past. They were in exile because of the actions of their

forebearers, who made bad decisions and entered into ill-advised political alliances. While in exile, they lost a lot of friends and family members. When they returned to Jerusalem, they returned without many people. Some people did not survive to return home, while others made the choice to remain in Babylon, where they had built new lives.

As you remember, on this day, remember the people who have been, and continue to be, important to you. Remember the way that your decisions have impacted your life, in both positive and negative ways. Remember that God can take even the bad decisions and bring good from them. And remember that it is never too late to make peace with your past.