

“Overflowing with remembrance”

II Kings 23:1-3

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Julie was getting ready to attend worship with her dad. He had been diagnosed with cancer, so she had traveled from Texas to California to be with him. Unfortunately, the weather was bad. It was raining outside. She asked him if he wanted her to grab him an umbrella. He said no, but as he said it he paused with a little uncertainty. She asked him, “Why don’t you want an umbrella?” He said the church had told him they were giving him a parasol that morning. Julie said, “Isn’t that a little girlish?” Anyway, her dad did not take an umbrella, and Julie watched expectantly at church that morning to find out why in the world they were giving her father a parasol. Well, a kind and gentle church member came up to him and gave him a prayer shawl. It had been knit by one of the members of the congregation. They told Bob to carry it with him to remind him of all the prayers that were being offered for him as he went through his treatments for cancer. Then it made sense. He wasn’t receiving a parasol after all. It was a prayer shawl. According to Julie the service was interrupted several times that morning as she and her mom and dad broke out in fits of laughter.

That laughter continues now many years later. And then almost immediately we have found our hearts filled with warm and tender thoughts about her father sitting in church with a prayer shawl in his lap, a shawl that reminded him that he was surrounded in prayer. Now when we see a parasol, or even an umbrella, and especially when we see a prayer shawl, our thoughts run back to a time when a church came alongside a man who was sick and needing the prayers and support of his church family.

On this Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans day at Dunn’s Corners Church we have signs and symbols that have brought comfort to you, signs and

symbols that have brought strength to you, signs and symbols that have brought hope to you, signs and symbols that have been part of your faith experience. As we bring our signs and symbols, we are following a great tradition, one in which rocks were set up as memorials, where things like water took on added significance about the washing away of sin, the gift of new birth, and the promise of living water, and where a loaf of bread and a chalice transport us back to the day when Jesus took bread and cup and transformed the ancient Passover celebration into a meal whose celebration is at the heart of the Christian faith.

These signs and symbols play an important role in our spiritual life. They help us to remember. Through them we remember God's faithfulness. We remember God's promises. We remember God's grace. We remember God's mercy. We remember God's power. We remember God's love. Why did God give the people of Israel festivals like the Passover, the Day of Atonement, the Festival of Booths, sacred days enacted with very ordinary signs and symbols, a cup of wine, some unleavened bread, a goat that wanders out into the wilderness, a week spent in tents right in the middle of the city where you live. Each and every one of these activities that utilized normal, everyday elements of life became reminders for Israel of the God who rescued them, who redeemed them, and who established them as his holy people. On a day when we have brought some of our own symbols, some of our own signs of how God has been active in our lives, we might well ask, "Why do we need to remember?" Is it too obvious of an answer to say, "So we don't forget"?

Unfortunately forgetting is a familiar part of Israel's experience with their God. The passage of Scripture today that tells of a king named Josiah finds its roots in a long and terrible time of forgetting. Josiah's royal predecessor was a king named Manasseh. Manasseh reigned for 55 years. We read in II Kings 21. "Manasseh did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He followed the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places (places where idols were worshiped); he erected altars to Baal (the Canaanite god) and

he made an Asherah pole (for worshiping the goddess).” He bowed down to false gods and built altars in the temple of the Lord. He brought the worship of false gods into the temple of the Lord. “He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord.” (II Kings 21:1-6)

Manasseh did not remember the Lord. Honestly, Manasseh not only forgot the Lord he rejected the Lord. Josiah comes on the scene. Josiah is elevated to the throne when he is eight years old, and he rules for thirty one years. His reign is described in words that place him in stark contrast to Manasseh. “Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely in the ways of his father David, not turning to the right or the left.”

The event that defined Josiah and his time on the throne happened in his eighteenth year. A sign that Josiah walked in the ways of the Lord is that he initiated repairs of the temple. Manasseh had set up altars in the temple. Josiah sends workers to repair and restore the temple. While the temple is being restored, there is a discovery of utmost importance. The high priest makes a report to the Shaphan, the king’s secretary. “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord.” Shaphan in turn reports to the king about the progress of repairs. As he draws his report to an end he tells the king, “Hilkiah the high priest gave me a book.” And then he read from the book in the presence of the king.

Josiah’s response reveals just what a man of God he is. He tore his robes. He heard through the reading of the Book of the Law all that God had done, and all that God required of his people, and it broke his heart. He tore his robes. If this happened in the 18th year of the reign of Josiah, and Manasseh ruled for fifty-five years, interrupted by the brief rule of another king that lasted two years, that means Israel had gone some 75 years without remembering who God is, what God had done, and what God required. Because they did not remember, they forgot, and that forgetting brought painful consequences. There was idolatry in the land

and in the temple. There were false gods who were worshiped. Detestable practices established a foothold, even the sacrifice of children. We can only imagine through the hard words that came from the prophets during these years of forgetting how injustice ruled the land, how people drifted far from the command to love the neighbor.

As we read in our passage this morning Josiah gathered the whole community together, from the least to the greatest, and he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant. Right then and right there Josiah renewed the covenant with the Lord, to follow the Lord and keep his commands, his statutes, and his decrees with all his heart and all his soul. All the people pledged themselves to this covenant. What follows is a time of great reform. In hearing the word, the people remembered and in remembering there was a season of reform.

Because Josiah follows so closely on the heels of Manasseh and his 55-year reign of terror, it would be easy to focus only on Manasseh. He deserves every boo and hiss we give him. He was a bad character, and his bad behavior was a blight on the people of God. But if we are too quick to identify Manasseh as the villain, we miss an opportunity to examine our own lives. This morning, this Reformation Sunday, this day when we celebrate Kirkin' o' the Tartans, we are presented with an important opportunity to look at our own lives and to ask ourselves how we cultivate a life of remembrance. Because we are a people who so easily forget, I pray this particular morning would spur us on to consider the many and varied ways we can cultivate a life of remembrance.

Think of the Book of the Covenant and the many ways God established practices that cultivated a life of remembrance. Remembrance was cultivated by the keeping of a calendar. One day in seven, set that apart. Let that be a Sabbath day. To be a people who remember we set time aside for God. Actually, God sets the time aside. We simply obey what God has called us to do. We cultivate remembrance by giving tithes and offerings to God. Israel was commanded to set aside the tithe, to give to God 10 percent of their

harvest and produce and bounty. God sets the tithe aside as a means for us to remember. Then God returns to the calendar and gives annual events, three feasts that were strategically placed throughout the year to coincide with plantings and first fruits and harvests. The people were called to remember God by keeping a day of Sabbath, to remember through tithes and offerings, to remember through festivals and feasts. If they kept these things the chances were good they would remember. If they forgot, as happened not only in the days of Manasseh but on a regular basis, they would not remember, and chaos and conflict and death and destruction would follow.

The remembering was so important God sought to have them incorporate it into every day and every moment of their lives. When the Book of the Covenant was discovered during the renovations of the temple, many scholars believe it was a copy of the book of Deuteronomy, the book that is a second telling of the law. When we consider what it means to remember, there is perhaps no better passage about remembering than Deuteronomy 6. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our god, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) Think of the signs and symbols an Israelite might bring. Signs along the road, memorable spots where their mother or father told stories of faith, signs from the doorposts of their houses, articles of clothing that had been wrapped on their foreheads, all are fair game for being reminders. God gave the special moments, events, and activities like Sabbath and the tithe and the feasts and festivals, but God also seems to encourage finding signs of remembrance in the everyday and in the ordinary moments of our lives.

We were asked today to bring things that have taken on special meaning for us and our families, things that help us remember our story, that help us make it our story. Because the Presbyterian Church has roots in Scotland, we have kilts today, and tartans, and we have a bagpipe. These things take on special significance because we use them to help us remember who we are and whose we are. But if a doorframe of a house or a simple rock can serve as a reminder, the door is really wide open on what we can bring that serves as a reminder for us.

Something very ordinary and every day that holds a special place for me is a screwdriver. A screwdriver for many people would be a sign and symbol for the fact that God gives gifts and many use a screwdriver in effective and helpful ways. For me, not so much. I am not very good with tools. I am not particularly good at fixing things. But every once in a while, I have experienced success.

I was at my desk one day at our church in Houston when Julie called on my cell phone. At the time she was working at a high-end women's clothing store. One of her stores was in the shopping center adjacent to our church. She was at the store working with the staff and they told her the bathroom door in the store was having a little trouble. Julie said no problem, I'll call my husband. For many wives calling their husband to fix something would be a natural call, but Julie knows me. Nevertheless, she persisted. Responding to her call for help, I grabbed a screwdriver and headed over to her store. I walked in. She introduced me like I was a knight in shining armor and showed me the bathroom door. She and the other ladies went back to the front of the store and carried on. By some miracle, by some act of God, I managed to fix the bathroom door. You should have seen me when I went to tell the ladies my story of success. I was walking proud. They cheered. It was a sweet moment. Is that why I hold before you a screwdriver? No.

Flush with success, I went back to check the bathroom door one more time. I was inside the bathroom, I closed the door, and I realized I had not fixed the door after all. And, to make matters worse, I was now

locked in the restroom at a woman's clothing store. Not good. But the women were all the way at the front of the store and couldn't hear me. In desperation I made a phone call back to our church and explained my dire straits. Two men were sent to rescue me, the kind of men who know how to fix things. I am so happy there are people like that, and I am thankful it is not only men who know how to fix things. But that day it was two men. They rushed over and set me free. I was never so happy to see John and Charles as I was that day. They freed me from my captivity. I burst out of the shackles of that women's restroom like I was passing through the waters of the Red Sea. Free at last, free at last... The only thing was, John and Charles had brought a camera, and they got me right at my most vulnerable moment. John Turner, one of my deliverers, had recently had a surgery to remove one of his eyes, which was not a whole lot of fun. He had a glass eye. Later when John told that story to a large group at church he said that when he saw me trapped in that women's restroom, he laughed so hard his eye almost popped out.

I don't hold up a screwdriver as a sign of success and pride. For me it is a helpful reminder of humility. And more than that, the screwdriver is a sign that no one person has all the gifts or all the tools. Together we are like a tool chest, very different people with different gifts and talents. Each one is important. Each one matters. Nowhere in the Bible will you find a statement that the church is a tool chest. But we do read that we are the Body of Christ. And in that Body there are different parts with different functions and different people with different gifts. In that Body every member belongs. In that Body ones who the world considers weak or unimportant are treated in a different way, with dignity, with respect. At least that is what God intends. When we forget we become a society that labels people, that elevates certain people and puts down others, we identify more by things like our ethnic background, our culture, our financial resources, our sexual orientation, our power, our politics. We become divided. But when we remember, when we remember we find ourselves working really hard to be a community that includes, a community that welcomes, a community that offers protection to the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, the strangers, the

aliens, the suffering, and the lost. A screwdriver helps me remember the God whose love is for all people and the God who has a purpose and a place for all people. Is there something that helps you remember those things?

You bury the Book of the Law, you set it aside, you forget about it, you neglect it, and you end up losing your reminders, your signs, your symbols. If a parasol and a prayer shawl and a screwdriver and some of these other items would be reminders to us, what about a table, what about a loaf of bread, what about a chalice, what about a baptismal font? What about a cross? These signs and these symbols will not let us forget. These signs and these symbols cause us to remember in ways that are deep and profound and personal. These signs and these symbols serve to continually reform us, to shape us in ever new ways into a people of faith.

One of my hopes is that in sharing these signs and symbols today, we might all find our faith strengthened. We live in a long tradition where the bread and cup, the waters of baptism, the cross, have been the symbols of ones who went before us and who passed their meaning on to us. Now they are our signs. Now they are our symbols. Perhaps some of the signs and symbols others brought today will help you to remember.

I am not of Scottish heritage. I have been to Scotland. I loved it. But I don't have roots in Scotland. And yet when somebody plays the bagpipe...when that sound fills the air...and in particular, when somebody plays Amazing Grace...something happens in my heart and in my soul. It happened for many of us right here in this sanctuary. This was several years ago. One of our dear members, June Wilson, had been in failing health. Her daughter who lived on the other side of the country had a visit planned to see her mom. She contacted the church and asked if she could play Amazing Grace on the bagpipes the Sunday she was in town. Andy worked it out and it was a beautiful morning. Adding to the beauty was that June, her mother, was able to come to the church for the first time in several weeks. June's face that morning, when the pipes

began, and when she saw that it was her daughter, that moment is frozen in time. Our congregation shared in that moment. When June died just two days later, and that moment became her last moment in church, that became a moment sealed in our memory. Those moments help us remember the God who watches over our lives in ways that are more profound than we could ever imagine.

Today when we finish our service, we will have bagpipes and we will have Amazing Grace. These aren't remembrances for someone else. These are for us. These sights, these sounds, these signs, these symbols, they are for us, so that we do not forget our God. They are for us so we remember our God. When we remember, we put ourselves in a place for God to reform us, to shape us. When we remember, we put ourselves in a place for God to renew us. On this Reformation Sunday, on this day when we remember, surrounded by Tartans and signs and symbols of faith, may we lift our voices, to the sounds of the pipes, and sing of God's amazing grace.