

“Remember Them”

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A reflection for Bethany United Church’s 175th Anniversary

Psalm 78:1-8

October 21, 2018

Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

Psalm 78 is about remembering.

*Listen up! (It says.) Lean in closer. I have something to tell you. These are words of wisdom, “dark sayings of old.” I will tell you things handed to us by our ancestors, for us to hand over to you, our children, for you to tell your children.*¹

This Psalm is a history lesson. Not the sort given from the front of a classroom or typed into a textbook. This lesson is one told around the dining table, or while doing dishes together, or at the campfire when the embers are burning low. Even our setting today feels too formal, not quite personal enough. Still, lean in and listen. This history is our story, these “dark sayings of old.”

That’s a heavy phrase, “dark sayings of old.” This is how the King James version put it. That was the Bible translation those first Bethany settlers held to their hearts. Any translation is taking a foreign phrase and putting it into our words. “Dark sayings of old,” is how they translated it then. I checked how others put it now.

. . . lessons of the past.
. . . hidden lessons.
. . . hidden things.
. . . insightful observations.
. . . sweet old truths.
. . . riddles.
. . . mysteries.²

Frankly, I still like “dark sayings of old.” It has a feeling of mist and mystery.

II

I was in the Ponsonby cemetery, over on the county road. The stone markers are weathered, broken, and were moved back when the road was widened. Still, you can make out some of the names. Many were Bethany folks.

What “dark sayings of old,” might they tell? Not “dark” in the sense of “bad.” No, dark:

¹ My loose summary and paraphrase of verses 1-6.

² In order, from the JPS, NLT, NIV, NET, MSG, CEB and CEV. The translation “dark sayings from of old” is used in the NRSV, ESV and NASB (in addition to the KJV).

heavy, thick, hard to see-through, yet rich and full. What “*dark sayings of old*” would you want them to tell?

Would they be of homes and families left far behind forever? Why did they come from there to this land? What stories would they tell?

Would they be of forests cleared, land broken, cabins raised and barns built? Many were new to farming, period. Let alone farming here. None of them knew winters like ours. What stories would they tell?

Would they be of birthing and raising children, and sometimes burying them? Whatever healthcare existed anywhere then, these folks were far from it. What stories would they tell?

Standing in the cemetery, I thought of this land, new to them, which became their place of ending and beginning. I saw the same sun break through the trees, as it has every day before and since. The ice melting on Cox Creek. The bushes swelling with berries. The fields coming alive. And I wondered at their excitement as the next newcomer-family was seen with surprise, cresting the hill and coming down the trail where, today, cars scream by far too fast. Newcomers who would become neighbours, at Bethany.

What would they say of their faith?

Would they be like us, often reluctant to share our deepest hearts? No, being Methodists of the frontier variety, evangelicals in the truest sense of the word, my hunch is those Bethany pioneers would have been very fine with telling their testimonies of God. They would have been exuberant in singing hymns, including those new-to-them ones like “Amazing Grace.”³

If they could slip in to share in worship with us today . . . I imagine they’d marvel at the furnace, lights, elevator, even this building itself. I wonder if they’d find these pews more comfortable than we do. What would be familiar to them? What would be strange? What would bother them? What would encourage them?

Would they be surprised that, so many years later, we are still here? And remembering them?

III

We are remembering them with Psalm 78 and its “dark sayings of old.”

We did not hear the whole thing; it’s 72 verses long! I simply read the first part, the

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace#Dissemination

introduction. It was enough, though, to give us the flavour.

It's not what you would first think of for an anniversary. If you were to read on, you would see that when it talks about the ancestors, it basically remembers how they messed up. They tested God. They rebelled against God. They lied about God. They forgot God. They did not keep faith with God. Time and again . . . this is what God's People did. The Psalm remembers that. It might sound familiar to us. It's what God's people do. Although these are not the sort of stories that get passed on — they are not flattering — I imagine our Bethany ancestors had their share of them too. After all, they were not *that* much different from us.

That's why a church anniversary should not be for nostalgia. "Remember the good ol' days!" We might imagine it as a simpler time, when things were less chaotic and uncertain, and not so much change. Maybe. We might imagine memories that warm us and stories that stir us, but those never tell the whole story. Not when it comes to telling stories about real people and real churches. The problem with "the good ol' days," is that we are pretty much remembering only the "good" about the "ol' days."

Psalm 78 does not do that. Nor, however, is the point of the Psalm to remember the bad things.

No, what the Psalm lifts up . . . what stands out . . . "the dark sayings of old" . . . the mystery . . . the thing the ancestors wanted us to recall and remember about them . . . is what God was doing in those days.

Look at what God was doing, both when we were faithful and when we were false.

Sometimes, God was testing us. Always, God was rescuing us.

Sometimes, God seemed to be leaving us. Always, God was leading us.

Sometimes, God seemed to be giving up on us. Always, God was forgiving us.

This is the story of God's People. This is the story in the Psalm. This is the story of Bethany.

IV

Why remember them, and all those who've come since in the Bethany story?

For nostalgia? No, that is rarely helpful.

Do we remember because some important things have been forgotten? Certainly. In the history of God's People, reform and revitalization has often come about when people regained and revived something important from the past. Those who have gone before us

have important things to teach us for the future.

For the future! That's what's vital. Remember for the future.

Remember the past well, to live into the future.

Remember yesterday faithfully, to live tomorrow with faithfulness.

Remember, because Bethany's story has always been part of God's story. It continues to be.

When we are getting things right and when we've gone wrong, our story is always part of God's story.

Whether Bethany is fifteen people, or fifty, or one hundred and fifty, our story is always part of God's story.

God, who with grace calls us. God, who with grace brings us together. God, who with grace sends us. God, always with us. God, always leading us. God, always loving us.

Praise be to God! Amen.