Sunday, December 4, 1988
THE GIFT OF THE PAST (No. 1 in a Series: Gifts We Need to Give)
Deuteronomy 6:4-9,20-25; Luke 3:1-6

What was the maiden name of your grandmother on your father's side? What was the maiden name of your grandmother on your mother's side? If you are married and have children and your children are old enough, do they know at least some of the family history? If not, they should.

There is, in our time, a tendency to not have much regard for family names. Have you noticed that many teenagers apparently do not even know the family names of their friends? They are simply introduced to us as Bill, David, and Mary. What does it mean that they are not linked to a whole network of relatives and to a particular history, when they are simply there by themselves — homeless, alone, in the present moment?

One thing it surely means is that, for many people today, such family connections are meaningless. They have no experience, in our disjointed age, of being linked to such family networks, to home, or to a family history. They do not appreciate the value of being connected.

It may also say something, however, not only about their isolation and their view of the past but also of their view of the future. It may say that they have no sense of being linked to future generations, of a continuity from the past, through the present, to the future. A knowledge of the past can give us strength for the present and hope for the future.

In this season of gift-giving, I am suggesting that one of the most important gifts we can give to those around us is the gift of the past, and part of that gift is to know something of the background of our lives — where we have come from, who some of our ancestors were, some of the stories of these ancestors, and how we came to be. The other two sermons in this series of three will deal with giving the gift of the future and the gift of the present. All are equally valuable gifts.

In addition to the gift of the past as far as our families are concerned, we also need the gift of the past that our Christian faith can bring us. And that's why seasons like Advent and Christmas are so important. We look back and recall our history in the faith. We remember that Jesus was born a Jew and came out of a long history of the Jewish people. The gift of the past is so important that in the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament, before we are told anything about Jesus and how he was born, we are given a family tree of Jesus that traces his ancestry all the way back to Abraham in the Old Testament. And in the Gospel of Luke, his ancestry is traced all the way back to Adam and Eve.

Over and over again in the Old Testament of the Bible, the people of Israel are told to remember their past and tell their children so their children can pass on the stories. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."

"When your children ask you in the time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?' Then you shall

say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and God brought us out from there, and God commanded us to do all these things.’”

Remember, remember, remember and give the gift of the past to those around you.

But why is remembering so important? What makes the gift of the past so valuable?

First of all, the gift of the past gives us a sense of perspective. We know we are not the first or the last, but each one of us is part of a long line of people — all connected, all part of God’s creation. In our religious faith, the gift of the past reminds us that Jesus did not appear out of nowhere, but that being the son of Mary and Joseph, he came out of a long history of a people with an abiding faith in one God who made all things good.
There is good evidence that Jesus received from his parents and from the synagogue school the gift of the past. He learned the history of his people. He came to know about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, and he came to know Moses and the prophets. He learned of the sacrifices of his people, their hardships, and their triumphs. He learned of God’s covenant with them.

We also learn, among other things, that many of our ancestors sacrificed a great deal so that we could be here. And before we humans came on the scene, other parts of creation were here millions of years before us, preparing the way. We are but a small speck in the history of creation, and yet we are connected with all of creation.

Thornton Wilder understood this and what it means when he gave the following as the address of one of his characters in his play, Our Town:

Jane Crofut; Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County, New Hampshire; The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; The Solar System; The Milky Way; The Universe; The Mind of God.

Secondly, the gift of the past is valuable because it helps us understand and live in the present. We are all molded from the events of the past and by what we remember. Where we come from, where our roots are, and what has happened to us and to our ancestors tells us something about ourselves. It is my impression that most of us do not tell our children enough stories about our own ancestors or about the ancestors of our faith, and we are the poorer for it. Perhaps most of us do not know the stories ourselves.
This past summer, for example, my wife (Rowena) and I took our oldest daughter and her two children (our granddaughters) with us on a trip to southwest Missouri, where Rowena grew up and where most of her relatives lived and where many died and are buried. We went to the little town where Rowena was born and tried to locate the house in which she was born. We visited some of the towns and farms where she grew up, and we went to the church in Springfield, Missouri, where we were married. We visited the old country cemeteries and found the graves of Rowena’s grandparents, her uncles and aunts, and others. We had previously done this kind of trip for my side of the family, all of whom grew up in rural eastern Missouri. There too, we visited the cemeteries and homesteads. In each case, we tried to find the houses where we were born and the schools we attended. It’s part of giving the gift of the past to those we love.

Many years ago, before my mother died, one of my sisters got my mother to recall the birth of each one of her seven children, problems with the birth, the kind of baby each one of us was

according to her memory, and then this sister wrote all of this down and gave each one of us a copy.

If we are to be fully human, we need three dimensions in our lives — past, present, and future. If any single one of these dimensions is lacking, life more easily becomes fouled up and is devoid of its fullest meaning.

There are many people who have no sense or knowledge of the past and try to live only in the present. Then a person lacks a sense of being connected. We all want answers to the questions: Where did I come from? Who am I? These are all questions our past tells us, and a sense of the past helps us define who we are.

There are some people, of course, who try to live only in the past, and that's usually the immediate past. Others have difficulty in letting go of the past, especially unpleasant experiences. Then they miss the present and have no hope for the future.

If we give and receive the gift of the past, it helps us live in the present because it also frees us from the past.

Some others of us make the mistake of trying to live mostly in the future. The person who continually says, "I can't wait until tomorrow, or until next week, or next month, or next year," is thinking so much about the future that he or she completely misses the joy of the present and has no use for or learns nothing from the past at all.

We need all three dimensions to make our lives complete — the past, the present, and the future. The stories that are passed on to us about our own past and about the past in our religious faith are very important. Know these stories and tell them to those who are younger than you.

I think a pretty good case can be made for the fact that the persons in our society who most often get into serious trouble are those who have no sense of their roots. They have not been given the gift of the past. Because of this, they do not feel connected and have no foundation on which to build.

On the other hand, when we do know the story of our heritage, when we have been given the gift of the past, then there is strength for the present. In our city of Lincoln and the State of Nebraska and nationwide and even beyond our national borders, a large part of the strength and dignity of the German people who came here from Russia comes from the fact that they have made a conscious attempt to remember the past and they continue to give it as a gift to those who follow them.

So it should be for all of us as families and as Christians. In this season of Advent, we are reminded again that our religious story begins with Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, and continues on up through Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and on and on. It was the late Pope Pius XII who observed that spiritually we are all Semites.

From the Jews, we received the Ten Commandments. From the Jews, we received our faith in one God who created all of creation, including the earth, and God made it all good. The Jewish Bible is also a part of our Bible — what we call the Old Testament. From the Jews, we received the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ. These are all gifts to us from the past.

When John the Baptist came to tell the people of his time about the Messiah who was coming, he began by reminding them of their history, of the gifts from the past — he quoted the Prophet Isaiah.

We need to know the story of our religious past in addition to that of our own personal family history. From these stories come a sense of place, a sense of belonging, the knowledge that we are connected. It is the gift of the past that gives us our roots, and without roots, we are like a tree or a plant without roots — we dry up, or the wind comes along and we have no strength to stand.

There is a memorable line in the book entitled Roots by Alex Haley, when Kissy explains to Chicken George why she cannot marry Sam. “Sam wasn’t like us,” Kissy explains, “Nobody ever told him where he came from, so he didn’t have no dream of where he ought to be going.”

This Advent and Christmas, give those you love the gift of the past. Amen.