Sunday, January 14, 1990
SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER
Psalm 23; John 14:1-7

Two weeks ago, the title of the sermon was “Some Things to Forget.” There are some things we need to forget and leave behind as we go forward, not only in this new year of 1990, but as we go forward all through our lives. A few years ago, Judith Viorst wrote a book entitled Necessary Losses. She pointed out that forgetting, leaving behind, and loss are all a part of life. They are universal, unavoidable, inexorable, and necessary because we grow by losing, leaving, and letting go. The road to human development is paved with renunciation.

I suggested in that sermon on forgetting that we each make a list of things we need to leave behind and forget, then tear up or burn that list so we can move on. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians that in his experience as a follower of Christ, he found it necessary to forget what lies behind and to go forward to what lies ahead. Jesus said the same thing in different words.

However, there are also some things we need to remember. Over and over again in the Bible, we are told to “remember.” That’s largely what the Bible itself is — the remembering of people who knew God and who were called by God. The Church has been defined as “the people of God remembering Jesus.”

Remembering the right things keeps us from making the same mistakes over and over again. Most of us as children, for example, if we touched a hot stove once, quickly remembered not to touch it again. The right kind of remembering gives us a solid foundation for living in the present and hope for the future.

What then are some of the things we need to remember as human beings and as Christians?

First, there are some obvious things we need to remember as we go about our day-to-day living. If you are married, it’s a good idea to remember your wedding anniversary. It is also wise and helpful to remember your spouse’s birthday and to let your spouse know that you remember it. It is a good thing to remember the birthdays of your parents and your children and to celebrate all of these occasions appropriately. We all know how much people appreciate it when we remember their names and how to pronounce and spell them correctly.

Have you noticed that most of our memories, especially as we get older, are filled with a lot of miscellaneous information we have picked up over time? A few years ago, a very popular game, Trivial Pursuit, sold widely. I believe one reason it was so well liked, especially among those of us who are a little older, is that it gave us a chance to use some of that miscellaneous information we had picked up over the years and stored in our memory.

Each culture has a kind of common memory, and part of this remembering we put into sayings or rules for living or unwritten laws. Here are some examples: Most of us are familiar with and remember Murphy’s Law: “If anything can go wrong, it will.” A popular way of stating Murphy’s Law is: “Jelly bread always falls jelly-side down.” Recently, I discovered an extension to Murphy’s Law: “Nothing is ever so bad that it can’t get worse.”

All of us remember another rule and have experienced it: “The other line moves faster.” “If you change lines, the one you just left will start to move faster than the one you are now in.”

Switching back fouls up both lines and makes everybody angry. Have you also noticed that the slowest checker is always at the quick-check-out lane?

Here's a rule I discovered long ago and always remember about church attendance:

If the weather is extremely bad, church attendance will be down.
If the weather is extremely good, church attendance will be down.
If church bulletins are in short supply, church attendance will exceed all expectations.
A new rule that has come into existence because of high technology is this one: "To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer."

Here's a rule most college or university students remember: "The one course you must take to graduate will not be offered during your last semester."

A rule that all nurses remember is: "There are two kinds of adhesive tape: that which won't stay on and that which won't come off."

Now let's look more seriously at some things to remember as a Christian. I'm going to give you my list, that is, I'm going to tell you what's been of tremendous help to me over the years. Most of what I remember are passages from different parts of the Bible that I've committed to memory.

I hope that as a result of this sermon, you will compile your own list of things to remember as a follower of Jesus. I also hope you will re-examine your remembering from time to time and perhaps add to it. I know my list of things to remember has grown over the years.

One of my favorite Bible quotations, which is etched into my memory, comes from the Prophet Micah in the Old Testament. I remember it because it is a kind of summation of what God expects of us as human beings living in God's creation: "God has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

An answer to a question that is related to what Micah said, but which is not from the Bible, but from the Westminster Catechism, is this one, and I try never to forget it: "What is the chief end of human beings?" And the answer: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever."

Another very basic promise of God that I constantly remember is what the Apostle Paul wrote to the members of the Church in Rome in his letter to the Romans: "If God is for us, who is against us?... It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died and who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

John 3:16 is another verse in the Bible that is a part of my Christian memory: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The best summary of the essential teachings of Jesus is contained in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in the Gospel of Matthew in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Many of these verses are things I hope I will never forget. Some examples:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

“Therefore I tell you,” said Jesus, “do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.”

Other words of Jesus that I never forget are these: “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Some things to remember — there is perhaps no passage in the Bible as beloved as the 23rd Psalm. There are probably more people in the Jewish faith and Christian faith who know this by heart than any other passage.

When I ask the family, relatives, and friends of someone who has died if they have any particular Bible passage they want me to read as part of the funeral or memorial service, the 23rd Psalm is mentioned more than any other one.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

If you have not done so, I urge you to commit this Psalm to memory so that you can say it at any time of day or night, wherever you are. Learn to say it slowly and thoughtfully, one phrase at a time, and then think about each phrase after you say it.

This Psalm, above all others, helps us to remember that when we are resting in green pastures, beside the still waters, we may not realize we need God. But when life becomes turbulent, when we realize how tenuous our grip on life may be as we read of mass disasters or see someone die, when we worry that death may come and render meaningless everything

we have worked so hard for, that is when we need God. We need to know that God is with us in the valley of the shadow.

This Psalm helps us to remember that God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. As a minister, I work with many people who are coping with grief. I see them before and after funerals and see them in church throughout the first year of mourning.

Sometimes I see them wanting to stay too long in the valley of the shadow and not remembering that God promises to walk with them through the valley of the shadow. The author of Psalm 23 knew that God would not bring back the loved one, but God can do the next best thing. God can take you by the hand and guide you through the valley of the shadow of death until you come out again into the sunlight on the other side.

God can bring you to the understanding that loss is painful only because life is good and life is precious.

People often ask, “Where is God when people are tortured and murdered? Where was God when black people were brutalized by angry mobs and bigoted people in our own country, or when any group of people is discriminated against?”

It helps me to remember, as Rabbi Kushner put it: “God is found in the courage of the human soul to stand up for human dignity, no matter what the odds, so that no matter how poor, no matter how uneducated, or how badly outnumbered, people are willing to risk their lives for what they believe is right.”

God is in the power and courage of people who say, “I may die in the attempt, but I will die one day anyway, so I might as well spend my life in the service of something I believe in.”

God is not found only in happy endings. God does not guarantee that you will survive, or even that the side of justice will win sometime soon. God does promise that if you die on behalf of justice and mercy, your sacrifice will not have been in vain. Deeds of courage and self-sacrifice of this kind are never meaningless. Some problems are too grave to be solved in one lifetime. It is God who links one lifetime to another, who joins one heroic sacrifice to another, until justice triumphs.

Natan Sharansky was a Jewish activist imprisoned by the Soviet government for many years. Despite the efforts of his captors to break his spirit, he survived his sentence and came out of prison stronger than he went in by constantly reminding himself that the power of God he relied on was greater than the power of those who kept him in prison. God did not open the doors of his jail cell, but God did keep him free in spirit wherever he was. When he was finally released and permitted to go to Israel, he told his story in an autobiography and chose for its title a phrase from the 23rd Psalm, Fear No Evil. He had memorized that Psalm and would recite it to himself over and over again when things were the hardest.

There are some things, as Christians, we need always to remember, and by remembering them, God gives us amazing power. Amen.