

BACH TO THE FUTURE

Sermon, March 21, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

The story is told of a wealthy American who traveled to the Far East in the late 50's to purchase textiles and clothing. After being wined and dined at a banquet, he was asked by his Asian hosts to say a few words. He began with a very long, elaborate joke. The translator patiently waited until he had finished the story, then he stepped forward and spoke only a few brief sentences in translation. The hall erupted with laughter ... people clapped, whistled, and stomped their feet. The speaker wondered how this translator could so compress his story and still carry the humor with such a punch. Later, the American learned what the translator actually said in "translation." *"The fat man with a big checkbook told a funny story. Do what you think appropriate."*

In 1722 the town council of Leipzig, Germany sought a new cantor for the Church of St. Thomas. Their most promising candidate turned them down. Their second choice also declined. Finally, as one member of the council wrote, "Since the best man could not be obtained, a mediocre one would have to be accepted." So, they hired the "mediocre" candidate, whose name was Johann Sebastian Bach ... who went on to become arguably the best and most inspiring composer in Western history. We commemorate the 325th anniversary of his birth today. In your bulletin insert, you'll find the following quotation from British conductor John Eliot Gardiner about this "mediocre" candidate of Leipzig:

"Bach is probably the only composer whose musical output is so rich, so challenging to the performers and so spiritually uplifting to both performer and listener alike, that one would gladly spend a year in his exclusive company. I believe Bach's music carries a universal message of hope and faith which can touch anybody, irrespective of their culture, religion or musical knowledge."

At the beginning and end of his compositions Bach wrote the Latin letters JJ and SDG. Before writing a note, he would write "J.J." These letters were a sort of invocation, they abbreviated his heart-felt prayer, *Jesu juva*, "Jesus help (me)." At the end he would write "S.D.G.," an abbreviation of "Soli Deo Gloria" ,, "To God alone be the glory." And in between every JJ and SDG, we find some of the most uplifting, masterfully complex, and aesthetically beautiful musical compositions ever heard by human ears. And Mr. Bach wasn't just composing for the fat men with the big checkbooks in the churches of his time; he was not working to perform for the benefactors. Nor did Bach compose his cantatas and his masses and his orchestrations or any of his music for his own vanity and glory. He did all he did for the glory of God. In fact, I'd like to recommend the Bach devotional for each day: start your day every morning with the prayer "J.J.", and go out to live each day with the goal of being able to end your day's labor with the benediction "S.D.G." Everything Bach did was done S.D.G., and this is precisely why Bach's music has withstood the test of time. It was not written primarily to please human audiences; it was written to glorify God ... and his music's impact has gone on to move and inspire millions over the centuries.

In today's Old Testament lesson, God says through the prophet Isaiah, "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am about to do a new thing." And Paul echoes the same sentiment saying, "Forgetting what is behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal ..." In both texts we are urged to forget the past, to set aside what is past, and look for the new.

At the risk of incurring a lightning bolt, I'd like to point out that at first reading Paul and the Lord God are sounding like a couple of native Rhode Islanders, and saying "Fahgeddabowtit!" (All week long that Reliable Collision commercial has been running through my head. "Yew can fahgeddabowtit; I'm taking my cah to Reliable.") Forgetting what is behind? That seems so counter to what the Bible so often encourages us to do ... and that is to REMEMBER. Someone counted there are actually some two-hundred-seventy times in the Bible we are told to "remember" ... it is, in fact, the most frequent command given in the Bible. (Does anyone remember the second most frequent command given in the Bible? It is "Fear not.") *Forget* the former things? You just want us to fahgeddabowtit? Isn't that dangerous? After all, don't our pasts define us? Don't our memories tell us who we are and how we are to behave in the present? Israel's life, the church's life, are all built on remembrance. 270 times we read, "*Remember. Remember Remember.*" Egypt, Moses, the Red Sea, manna, water from the rock, covenant at Sinai, the Promised Land ... and now God is saying forget all of this? Well, in a way, yes, He is. "Forget about the former things," says the voice of God through the prophet, because there is something yet more astounding God is doing or is about to do. The past will pale compared to the future. Look for the new!

And Paul strikes the same chord. In the context of our Epistle reading he is engaged in an argument with some leaders in Philippi who are insisting Christ's followers need to return to old Jewish practices such as circumcision, dietary restrictions, and other laws. Paul then lists his own past as a faithful Jew. He has an impressive, formidable resume! As to being righteous under the law, Paul says he "was faultless." This is not boasting on Paul's part, he is simply remembering and rehearsing his past. There was more he could have listed:

his faithfulness as an apostle to the Gentiles, how many churches he started, how many pairs of sandals he wore out walking the literally thousands of miles he traveled for the gospel, his beatings, his imprisonments, his sufferings for the sake of the gospel. But for Paul, none of that is any longer important. He is "fahgeddingabowtit," laying it all aside to press on to higher and more important matters, to live his life SDG, Soli Deo Gloria.

Now, the point is not that the past is no good. In fact, the past is crucially important. But as good as it is, it is the past. It can and does remind us of where we've come from, it can and does remind us of God's faithfulness, it can and does remind us of our roots, our foundations, our heritage ... but we cannot *live* there. We cannot live in the past. That's the first problem with remembrance: no matter how good things may have been once upon a time, we cannot live in that past nor out of that past very long. We must *live* and *do* and *press on* right now. It is right now that life is the challenge, right now that life can either flourish or get off track; it is right now we need to live.

A second problem with memory is that as good as it can be, it can also be a limitation. It recalls our failures as well as successes. And, those failures have a way of potentially limiting our present and our future. One recent event to illustrate this happened just this past Thursday, an hour before Session. I got a telephone call out of the blue from an old high school football coach; he was calling to tell me of a special event being planned to honor an old teammate (*my high school classmate and teammate Lt. General David Rodriguez, former deputy general in command of the Afghanistan theater, former commanding general of the 82nd Airborne, and now Commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command ... he is being inducted into our school's Hall of Fame next month.*) Now, this coach always had something of an intimidating manner with me ... he was good at highlighting my failures; I think he operated on the philosophy (which didn't work all the well with me) that if he could get you angry enough, you'd get so *mad* you'd get *better*. You know, the kind of coach who told me I ran like a deer ... a John Deere tractor. All of a sudden, for the briefest of moments on Thursday evening, the telephone made me 36 or 35 years younger, feeling like a nervous, bumbling, awkward, big but clumsy high school adolescent who couldn't block his own grandmother if she came after the quarterback ... and then I thought, "Now wait a minute. I'm a doctor now." Many of you know that feeling. You know what I mean. Perceived or real failures in your past limit you, voices from the past (real or imagined) making you think you are too dumb, too fat, too slow, too inarticulate, too ugly, too (fill in the blank) to do whatever it is that's coming down the pike at you. And that's a lie from the pit! Your past can limit you, if you let it. Until we can set aside our pasts and be free of them, they can have power over us and keep us from living into new lives.

But perhaps most of all, the third problem of memory is that it can constrain our vision. On Good Friday we'll be reviewing the seven last words of our dying Lord. Well, it's been said that the seven last words of the dying church are "1. We've 2. Never 3. Done 4. It 5. That 6. Way 7. Before." This kind of "remembrance" can limit or cripple our ability to conceive of anything new. Isaiah's audience were the Jews who had been in exile now for almost forty years; they thought that the best had already come for them, their glory years were in the past, and nothing more could be expected. So they settled in, just coping with the way it was. And if you do that long enough, captivity can become a comfortable alternative, and you won't go ... anywhere. I mean, people can and do get used to golden handcuffs ... lifestyles that are constraining us, stifling us, holding us in comfortable captivity. It doesn't take long to convince ourselves that we cannot really live without those golden handcuffs.

"So, forget all of it," God says through Isaiah, "I am about to do a new thing. ... do you see it? CAN you see it?!" So, too, for Paul; "Forget it! As good as the good old ways were, and remember, I was very good at living under the constraints of the Jewish law, those old ways were not good enough!" Forget about it. Why? Because living in the past we miss the new ... we miss the exhilaration of living in and with and out of the power of God. "Jesus juva," we must press ahead. The whole Bible is a long and eventful story about a God who is passionate about the future. In a sense, the God who comes to His people in the present is already in the future, and encounters His people in promises for the future. We tend to think of God as being somehow above, or over, the people; however, in the Bible God is more often depicted as *ahead* of the people, calling them forward, constantly calling them *out* and *into* new adventures. He is calling them ... He is calling us ... *forward*. The past is gone, the past is over, the bad things in the past can be forgiven and wiped clean; let's hear the voice of the God who is ahead of us, calling us into the new thing He is doing. The God of Hope is not above us; He is ahead of us. Let that image sink into you. Let it reshape how you think of your own relationship with God.

The gospel is about more than remembering the old, remembering the exodus or that Israel returned home from exile. It is even about more than rehearsing and trying to follow the teachings of Jesus. It is even about more than remembering an upper room, a cross and an empty tomb. It is even about more than the forgiveness of sins, even though it is all these things. It is about what Paul calls "the prize," about "knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection" at the center of our lives as He touches and begins to transform our lives one day at a time. Let us keep responding to what Paul calls the "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

This Table has "This Do In Remembrance of Me." emblazoned across it. This Table is about more than remembrance, though. I will say more about this Maundy Thursday, but for now let me simply say that each time you look to this table, look for the new. Where do things in your life need to be new, as you remember the price paid for your salvation? Look to this table, saying JJ ... and then go to live into your future SDG. Amen.