

A Service of Replenishment and Hope for Caregivers and Senior Loved Ones

May 24, 2016, 11 a.m., Williamsburg UMC

Helen Casey-Rutland, Minister of Congregational Care

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 4a, 5a, 19b, 20b, 21a

43 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself.

When my husband was first getting to know my family, he noticed that, every time we got together, someone would take note of the date and remark on how it was great-aunt Maude's 126th birthday or cousin Lu's 31st anniversary. And sometimes not everyone would agree on exactly the number of years being marked or on the exact date, and so several minutes would be spent determining if great-aunt Maude would be 126 or 127 if she were still living or the real anniversary was today or tomorrow.

My husband's family is not like this. They are lucky if they remember their own birthdays, they frequently forget how old they are, and I know all their anniversaries better than they do.

But they tell great stories. They like camping and hiking, and they have stories of shimmying along cliffs on trails narrower than their shoes, of running to the car to avoid a

charging Alaskan brown bear, of coming across a geyser in Yellowstone that almost never erupts just as it is beginning its biggest eruption in recorded history. They have stories of hitchhiking overseas and getting picked up by the presidential motorcade. Of being rescued from sinking boats and locked caves and tall buildings with blaring fire alarms.

When I was first getting to know my husband's family, I was amazed at their adventures. But over time I started hearing them tell about events of which I had been a part. And they didn't remember the events the way I remembered them. I realized they all had great memories – just not always accurate ones. They tell wonderfully creative and entertaining stories that resemble real-life, but their memories contain increasing embellishment with each retelling. They do remember the important things well – they remember their care for one another, and the unexpected kindnesses they've received along the way, and the wonder and beauty of the world God has given us. They may not always remember things accurately, but they remember the good stuff sometimes better than it was, and a lot of times they remember people better than they probably were – and that's not such a bad way to remember.

I knew a woman whose son had died a number of years before I met her. He died in an accident when he was about 22. One day when we were talking, I said to her – tell me about your son. What was he like? And she told me a story about a time he did something that disappointed her terribly. You know how even the most admirable of young people sometimes make choices that their parents have trouble appreciating? It was that kind of thing – nothing serious. But it hurt his mother – even though he had no intention of hurting his mother. And the really sad thing was that, when she could have shared anything about his whole life, told me anything about his growing up, his love of animals, his marriage to a young woman who seemed just perfect for him, his big laugh – all these things I learned about from other people – she could have shared any of this, but the one story that shaped all her memories was this story of disappointment and hurt.

Memories can be tricky. Accurate or not, for good or ill, they shape our understanding of our relationships and of who we are. They are the raw material that gives meaning to our lives.

You remember, in the Bible, the story of the exile. Back more than 2500 years ago, the people of Judah are defeated and deported from Jerusalem and from their homeland to Babylon – ripped away from their communities, from their homes, from the temple which was their center of worship and the place where they met God. They are torn away from their customs and language and all the things that remind them of who they were. They are exiled – aliens in a strange and foreign land. And they do not know how to function.

Nothing is right. Nothing is the way it is supposed to be. How do we even sing the songs of our God in this foreign land? God's temple is not here. How can we pray? Does

God hear us now? How can we make sense of our lives when everything we ever built and everything we ever hoped for has crumbled and slipped away? Who are we now?

Their questions are not all that different from those we all face, when the life we thought we'd planned doesn't work out the way we envisioned.

Some of you know that 23 years ago, I gave birth to triplets – one girl, two boys. As you might imagine, my husband and I are still recovering from the shock. I remember filling out a form at the doctor's office one day, and there was a line that said "occupation". And I thought, I sleep in spurts of 2-3 hours, have a changing table in my dining room, live with baby spittle on my shirt, push a stroller around the neighborhood that weighs as much as I do, and am an expert at simultaneously cooking meals, comforting a child, and distinguishing between playdoh and cookie dough. There was a time when I was the pastor of a church and had an office and wore clean clothes and never smelled like Pablum. There was a time when I had friends and we talked about things other than the latest trip to the pediatrician's office. But all that seems like a distant memory. Who am I now?

When our lives get absorbed in anything that overwhelms us – in all-consuming work, in unexpected crises, in the care of others -- when exhaustion saps our reserves, when our resilience wanes – we can begin to lose track of who we are.

The exiles in Babylon – they need help remembering who they are. Like refugees throughout the ages, like immigrants and returning soldiers, those exiles have been dislocated from the communities, the rules, the practices that give them identity.

They think that, since God has let them be defeated, God has abandoned them. The Promised Land is lost. They are lost. Who are they in this now they never imagined having to face?

A friend of mine and her husband adopted a child from overseas as a result of a remarkable series of events that she and her family could only see as God at work. She wrote the whole story for her son and created a book with the story and photos and copies of all the travel documents and birth records and the family tree and the family history and her reflections on the miracle that he came to be in their lives. She wants him to know that he is a unique and beloved child of God, and that he is their child as much as any child ever could be their child. She wants him to know who he is. So she has made sure to tell the story.

Each generation bears and passes on the memories of the generations gone before – tells the stories of who we are. It's true in our families and in our nation. We retell the stories that give us meaning and purpose, that shape our values and dreams.

We have holidays devoted to telling the stories of who we are as a nation – Memorial Day recalls those lost in military service. Independence Day and Labor Day and Martin Luther King Day, and President’s Day – they all are days that remind us of the lives and values and struggles embodied in the stories that make us who we are.

On friends’ and family’s birthdays – or at least on the big ones that end in zero -- we remember what makes the honoree special -- we retell the stories that matter.

And nearly every religious tradition has days devoted to remembering the story – for us every Sunday recalls Easter and the triumph of love over hate, of God’s goodness of the worst of evil, of life over death.

We are stewards of memories.

And that can be a lonely job when we become sole custodians of memories we once shared. Dementia robs the memories of those afflicted with it. But it also shoulders those closest with the burden of doing the remembering for someone else. We have to remember not only who we are, but who they are, who they once were. And we are the tellers not only of our own stories but of theirs as well.

It’s a big job. Especially when our days get hijacked by exhaustion or overrun by stress. And we worry that we just might not be up to it.

*But now thus says the Holy One
who created you,
who formed you,
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Those are the words to exiles in Babylon. And to us as well.

You who are in exile, you who are afraid of losing your bearings, you who feel like aliens inhabiting a disorienting world that you never planned for – I have not forgotten you. I have called you by name, God says. You are mine.

That’s the word of God through Isaiah.

You may wonder who you are in these disrupted circumstances, but God remembers. You may fear the future, but listen –

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

*Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you...*

We are stewards of memories. Good memories. Bad memories. Secrets. Memories that weigh on our hearts. Dementia can make it hard to deal with complicated memories, relationships, and experiences. Sometimes our memories need healing. We need forgiveness for a past we regret. We need answers for a trauma we endured. We need release from a wound that festers still. We need to let go of a hurt we've nursed too long.

And it's already too late to talk it out rationally, to set things straight once and for all.

Like the exiles in Babylon, we can't make sense of our pain, we can't go back, we can't fix it, we can't change the past.

But we can be honest. And cry to God. When life gets overwhelming, the folks in the Bible get angry at God and then they get angry at themselves and then they get angry at anyone they can possibly blame for their troubles. And they confess, and they defend themselves and try to justify themselves, and they beg for help. And they do all this not because they are faithless but because they are faithful. God will be there and make up the difference whenever they fall short. *O God -- Forgive them. Forgive me. Heal this disappointment, resentment, hurt, betrayal. Don't leave me here alone, God. Lead me, give me strength, and make me whole.* And in Isaiah God says:

*Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself.*

I visited a man who was in the hospital. His mind was fine, and his hearing and eyesight were fine, but his movement was very slow and his speech very, very slow and soft – it could take minutes to get out one or two sentences. So his family created a poster for the wall above his bed. Thank you nurses and doctors and CNAs and everyone who is taking care of our beloved dad! He talks slowly, but his mind works fine. If you wait, the words will come. And then they posted pictures and descriptions of what he liked to do and who he had been in his more active periods of life. They were interpreting for him. They were saying -- this feeble-looking fellow in this completely unflattering hospital gown is quite something – and he's loved.

When we get so caught up in just getting thru the day – just getting the bills paid, the doctor seen, the bed changed, the clothes washed, the phone answered, the medicine down, the socks up, the meals in, the trash out – we sometimes need someone to create for us a poster that hangs over us and names our gifts and tells our stories and has pictures of the communities that matter most to us, and says for us as much as for anyone else – this is so-and-so – a gifted and beloved child of God. Today is part of but one chapter in a rich and varied life.

Science tells us that when we retell stories of our past – when we do it well and with care – we can recreate those original feelings and that sense of being there. And if we tell the best stories and pass them on, we bear witness to our lives, and to the lives of those whose memories we hold, and we remember who we are. And offer our hopes and dreams and values and wisdom to those who follow. And sometimes through our stories, we can even take those in our care with us to places of joy and laughter and purpose and meaning – to a chapter in life now past. And together, by God’s grace, sometimes we find water in the desert.

I still have triplets. But my dining room holds no diaper pail and my shirts bear no baby spittle. I can remember those days, and I can even remember the laughter and happy noise and the creative wonderful mess and all the people who helped us survive. My children don’t remember that we read them *Blueberries for Sal* and *Goodnight Moon* several thousand times. But we tell them. That was one chapter in our lives -- lives that are filled with many other chapters, just as important to recall.

And if the day comes when my children are caring for me and dealing with my smelly messes and restless nights and endless needs, I hope they can remember that we baked cookies when it snowed outside and made playdoh sculptures on the kitchen floor and that our lives have lots of chapters and this is just one. And through all the chapters of our lives echoes the promise:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Amen.