

to come. And every regret we carry – not an unsolvable burden to be lugged around forever, but a reminder of the cost of what Christ has done for us at the cross.

And that's why Peter says to his flock this morning "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade." He says, "This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

And so, our memories are gifts from God that point us not only to the past but to a future that is even better. A future that makes our memories look sepia tone and one dimensional compared to what is yet before us.

Do you have a tendency to relive your past – your past glories or your past failures. If you do, you run the risk of making the past either an idol or a write off. And this can bind us up and make us unable to move forward into the future.

What do we do? Our nostalgia needs to be sent forward to our day of glorification. Our regret needs to be pushed backward to the cross where Jesus deals with all of our failures and missteps. And our faith can set us free to live boldly into the future that God has for us.

This is the importance of faith. You sometimes hear people say silly things like "It doesn't matter what you believe, it just matters how you live." But do you see how certain kinds of faith enables you to live differently today, while other beliefs bind you up unable to move forward?

And so we must ask, faith in what? Because faith in yourself, or the goodness of humanity, or faith in progress is shaky ground. But faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ will enable a way of living (in time) that is a whole

other thing.

Peter says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

What do these words mean? They mean that our regret has lost its power to define us. Our nostalgia has lost its power to limit us. It means God has a plan for your soul that is way better than anything you could have come up with on your own – but not a disembodied soul floating around heaven somewhere – but a soul that is fully restored in a body fully restored, in a creation fully restored, living the life you were always made to live.

The key is to be constantly reminding your heart about the truth about the past and the future. This truth will set you free – it will release you from the memories that haunt us and keep us looking backward.

And to those who entrust their times into his hands – past, present and future, God has said, "I will create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create..." (Isaiah 65:17-18). And so, nostalgia is no way to live. The best is yet to come.

And God has said "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). And so, regret is no way to live either because the past has been dealt with at the cross.

Instead, as the old hymn says, "Because he lives I can face tomorrow, Because he lives all fear is gone, Because I know, I know he holds the future, And life is worth the living just because he lives."

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Right on Time: Power in the Memories"

January 28th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-9

By Rev. Mike Putnam

I want to begin with a little thought experiment: I want you to take a moment to remember the last place you lived in. Not your present home but the one you lived in before this one.

Now, in your mind I want you to walk in the front door of that place and navigate your way toward the kitchen. Notice the various rooms and wall colours and furniture. Now go in and sit down in your favorite spot and take a look around.

Now dig a little deeper. Which people from that season of your life can you picture in that place with you. What happy and joyful moments took place there?

Okay, now come on back to the present. Do you see what just happened there? Your memory brought those vivid files of your past into your present. And what you felt back then still makes you feel something now.

Memory – why can I remember so many details about my past but not where I put my car keys this morning? Or why can I remember the name of my third-grade teacher but not the name of that person I've spoken to half a dozen times at church?

The great church father, Augustine, once said memory is "A vast palace where the ideas and thoughts about ourselves are stored." We all have memories that seem to be filed away deep in the recesses of our minds – only to be brought vividly to the light of day by a smell, a taste, a place, or story.

And then there are memories we wish we could be rid of. Memories that linger and affect our ability to do what we want or need to do now. There are memories of trauma, failure or sin that keep us on shaky ground, or in the realm of discouragement or shame.

This is the power of memory.

Memory can set us in motion toward a bright future. Or memory can keep things that happened in the past controlling us in the here and now.

Augustine says, "Memory is our present experience of the past." He says, "For it is in the chamber of my memory that I meet and remember myself."

Memories reanimate the past. Most of the time our memories work beneath the surface of our consciousness. We aren't aware of how our memories are impacting our present decisions and actions, but they do.

Our memories make us who we are. They reveal the real us. They tell the story we have lived, not the story we wish we lived. And so, we so often have a love/hate relationship with our memories.

But memory is a gift God has given us to help us live in time. It appears that the human species is particularly adept at remembering. It's our ability to remember and make meaning of those memories that makes us human. For many, losing our memory is our greatest fear. But in a fallen world, where every life is a blessed mix of joy and pain, giving too much attention to memories can make our memories go from a good servant to an unrelenting tyrant.

Because the past has a habit of not staying past. It infiltrates our present in all kinds of ways. Some of those ways are good. Our past experiences inform us and prepare us to better navigate the future. But there's two ways that our memories can steer us away from God's intended future.

The first way that our memories can derail our future is nostalgia. Nostalgia is a trap of comparison about time missed. Oh, do you remember "The good old days!" Do you remember when the world seemed simpler, and life better, and everything seemed to be

alright?

But the problem is that our sense of the past is often distorted by the fog of nostalgia rather than the clarity of reality.

I think of the Israelites escaping captivity in Egypt. You know the story. During their escape God provided guidance (a pillar of cloud and fire to follow) and protection (a miraculous path through the sea), and God provided for their daily needs (manna fresh every morning). It wasn't an easy journey to be sure, but God provided.

But despite God's amazing providence in the present, the Israelites still complained. Why did they complain? They complained because of a memory from back in Egypt. There was no fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.

So let's get this straight. The Israelites were saved from brutal slavery, by saving the power of God, and yet they were still unhappy. Because nostalgia made their memories sound better than they were. Nostalgia caused them to want to go back because their memory reduced this terrible reality to a minor inconvenience, and elevated the food they enjoyed to an unreasonable level of ultimate good.

That's the power of nostalgia – they were willing to forfeit God's providential plan for the nation Israel for a memory of how good the food was!

Longing for what we once had often causes us to photo shop the past in our minds into something better than it really was. Nostalgia distorts the past into an idol and prevents us from living into the present and the future that God has for us.

I'm a big fan of the TV series called *The Office*, and in that show one of the characters, Andy Bernard, once said something that has stuck with me. He says, "I wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've left them."

What if these are the good old days? What if one day we will say, "If only we could

get back to the way things were in 2024." Would that make this time a little sweeter. Would you live today a little differently if you knew that right now is a time you'll look back on nostalgically?

We all get nostalgic about some things – we all have memories we see through rose-coloured glasses. We hear a song that takes you back to the dance floor in your high school years, we taste food that makes you think of how mom used to make it. And it's natural to want to go back. But nostalgia has the potential to hijack our present and cancel out future blessings.

And so, gratitude for our former times honours God – but we must not make an idol out of our past experiences.

The second way that we let our past derail our future is with regret. If nostalgia is a trap of comparison about time missed, then regret is a trap of comparison about time misspent. You can't change the past. And yet so many of us wallow in our "if only's...". "If only I didn't..." "If only I had..." "If only I had known..."

How do we stop the past from invading the present and robbing us of today? Well, there's lots of platitudes you can insert here. "Live without regret." "Let bygones be bygones." "Upwards and onwards."

But how do you do that unless there is something real that unchains us from what was and resets what will be? How can we forge into a future that seems so uncertain and leave so much behind. How can nostalgia and regret not dominate our lives because both seem like reasonable responses to the disappointment and disillusionment we face in the present.

And friends, the answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The answer is Jesus on a cross, Jesus in a tomb, Jesus in a room, and Jesus in heaven! What do I mean by that?

I mean that we point our longings for what was good in our past and our regrets for how things turned out forward. ...Way

forward. Forward all the way to the end – which, it turns out is not the end at all but just a new beginning. And our new beginning isn't a wiping the slate clean and starting again, but it is the return of all that seems lost. That's our Christian hope. But our hope so often gets truncated.

"You going to heaven when we die!" we say. But is heaven good or better somehow? Will heaven make up for what we have lost? Or is heaven some kind of consolation prize for the unlucky folks who didn't make it? Well, that's what it is if we don't take into account the full eschatology (the promises of God for how the story ends) into account.

Let's take another little thought experiment. I want you to think of a place from your past where you felt truly happy and content. I want you picture a place and a time when you felt truly safe, secure and loved.

I remember a place – it was waking up at my grandparent's old farmhouse in Renfrew when I'd go to stay with them for a week during the summer as a kid. That farmhouse was special. It had a certain smell and a certain feel unlike any place I have ever experienced (before or since).

I remember the sounds of my grandfather getting up early in the morning, heading down the creaky stairs, gathering wood in the woodshed for the stove in the kitchen, the smell of the coffee brewing, the conversations I'd share with him over shredded wheat cereal before anyone else was up in the morning. I remember exploring the old farm property and fishing with him down by the lake.

Ah, but those memories are just memories now – golden memories of times that were but are no more. My grandparents are gone. I don't imagine I'll ever have experiences quite like those again.

But what if I told you that isn't true. In light of resurrection – our hope in Christ – we get it all back. But not in just some

heavenly spiritual sense, but in a real physical sense.

Because that's what we all want, isn't it? We want to smell, and to taste and to touch those things again – that's what our memories long for. We long for the ethereal realm of memory to become real and tangible again.

And that's why resurrection is such good news. You remember when Jesus appeared to his disciples – was he a spirit? No, they touched him, hugged him, they fed him! Because that's what we all want – to be released from the pain of our broken bodies and to be given something better – resurrection – embodied wholeness. And what happened to Jesus is what will happen to us – and all of creation one day. We get to have it all back, but this time it will be even better!

Because Christians don't believe in a disembodied spiritual hope. We believe in bodily resurrection. Which means the new creation isn't just a spiritual one but a physical one. And in our lives filled with nostalgia and past regrets that's incredibly good news!

It means I get to wake up in the farmhouse and run down those creaky old stairs and sit with my grandfather at the kitchen table and talk over shredded wheat and maple syrup, and wander the back fields of the farm again and sit in a boat together and catch a big pike and cook it on the barbecue (but this time I'll actually eat it because I like fish now). But this time it will be infused with the glory of God who will be with us fully – and without any of the residue of sin at work in me.

That's our hope. That's what we have to look forward to. A new heaven and a new earth where everything bad has been undone and everything lost is given back restored and renewed beyond our imaginations.

And so, every memory of those good times is not something lost but something yet