

Forget the Past

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well today sermon is entitled: Forget the past. And as it happens I have a pretty good dad joke about the past. Would you like to hear it? You know - well - the thing about Dad jokes as most of you know is that you hear them whether you want to or not. If you need, if your children need hearing protection right now you have just ask the coffee volunteers. Here it is: do not think about the past because you cannot change it, do not think about the future because you never know what will happen, and do not think about the present because I did not get you one.

[audience laughs]

That's pretty good, right? Pretty good. I used that at Christmas, it didn't go over very well. So I want to start with a question. We, I hope, will be a little more interactive today than usual, so I'm going to ask you to shout out answers to me on occasion. So, but this one, this first one is not going to be a shout out answer. It's going to work by hand raising poll situation. So of the two things which is more true for you, which do you find yourself worrying more about: the past or the future? Which do you find yourself worrying more about: the past or the future. Ok, you got your answer? OK, how many of you worry more about the future than the past? OK. And how many worry more about the past than the future? How many of you just said "yes" when I asked what you worry about? Yeah I heard somebody whisper it. Yeah there's no shame in that. How about this one, let's put a little bit more of a positive spin on it. When it comes to dreaming, do you find yourself dreaming more about the past, or dreaming more about the future? How many of you dream more about the past? OK. How many of you dream more about the future? OK, so the future is winning in both polls. Not that it's about winning and losing but that it seems to be how it's going.

I personally have found myself even this past weekend dreaming about both the past and the future. As Tim mentioned during our prayer time that my family and I are going on sabbatical - this is in actually four more Sundays, counting today, with you before I'm going to be gone for

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four months - and so we are dreaming about that. Not the part about being away from you, but about all the travel that we're going to do and the fun things that we're able to do because of the grant that we were awarded all that stuff. So I've been dreaming about the future. But also I've been dreaming a little bit about the past, because we had some really good college friends in town this past weekend, and I I'm learning, like, I have to admit that college was longer ago for me than I have been. I sort of feel like it was right... you know, the whole thing about the 90's were ten years ago? That's kind of how I feel about college. Even though it was twenty. But so, we had these really good friends in our house over the past weekend and it was causing me to sort of dream about the past. And we were talking about the music that we listened to in college - because the ninety's music is so much better than the music today - all that kind of good stuff. But if the sermon is entitled forget the past, we can be doing that, can't be dwelling on Nirvana, we have to move on.

I want to think about forgetting the past particularly in the context of our Lenten theme which is: *change our mind*. If you've been with us you've heard me talk about this. If it's your first Sunday with us let me give you a quick overview. Typically the season of Lent as we lead up toward Easter is characterized by repentance and that word carries a lot of baggage for many of us. But the word in the Bible, in the original languages which is translated as repentance, literally means to change your mind. And so during *this* season of Lent when we're engaging in *this* season of repentance, I've been asking you to think about changing your mind. And changing your mind can be spiritually challenging, but it can be spiritually powerful as well. And so we have this key verse from Romans 12 that we've returned to each time and I always ask you to say the second half of it with me: *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*. Did that make it onto the screen? It did. *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Change your mind during Lent, that's the challenge. And so as we think about the past and the idea of forgetting the past you see how maybe maybe it'll fit right in with the idea of changing your mind.

So here's my next question for you and you can you can shout out answers to this one. Why do we find it so hard to forget the past?

[indistinct audience answers that continue below]

OK. It informs our present, yes.

It's sometimes traumatic. It's very hard to forget something that was an experience of trauma, yes. What else?

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We feel guilty about decisions we made, so maybe regret.

It can't be changed. It can't be changed. Wow.

Humans rely on it for survival, like, we learn from what happened before, like, I shouldn't touch the stove again.

Yes, yes. It's baked into our natural selection I think is what you're saying. Yeah yeah yeah.

Just because we miss people. Yes, yes.

So far I'm hearing a lot of kind of negative reasons that it's hard to forget the past. Are there any positive reasons why it's hard to forget the past?

Something really great happened. I want to relive that former glory!

We can learn from it. That's an excellent observation.

There's emotion attached to it and whether it's good or bad that kind of makes it sort of indelible for us. Yeah, it's hard to let go of that.

[end of indistinct audience answers]

Well. As I was thinking about this idea "forget the past," and like, do I really want to title a sermon "forget the past"? Or is that.... you know, is that going to be hard for some people to think about? Because the truth is - I just need you to know this about me - that I have been quite fortunate in my life. I don't have any significant experiences of trauma that that I carry with me right now. I've had lots and lots of good days and weeks and years in my life and I'm fortunate and grateful for that. I know that's not true for everybody and so for me to say "forget the past", if that comes off as a little bit kind of like, well, like hard to hear, I'll just ask you to stick with me. And maybe we can get to the same place by the by the end of this sermon today.

But whether your reason for having difficulty forgetting the past or my reason for having difficulty forgetting the past, whether it's because of something good or something bad, I do think that today's scripture readings have a healthy challenge in store for all of us. And so I want to go to the first one of those that I want to look at today now. And it's from Philippians chapter 3. If you want to find it, if you're a person who likes to read along in the Bible, you can grab one of the red Bibles in the seat pockets and turn to page 954. You can also find the Bible in the artisan church app [Link to download Artisan Church app](#) or you maybe have a Bible app

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on your phone already. Or you just want to search on your search engine for Philippians 3 it'll come up. So this is a letter from Paul, a leader in the church, back to one of the churches in the church of Philippi. And here's what he says halfway through verse 4 of chapter 3.

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

***7** Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. **8** More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. **10** I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, **11** if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

***12** Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. **13** Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

This is like, fairly stark language about forgetting the past. It's where the title of the sermon comes from: forgetting what lies behind. Unequivocal isn't it? Why is it that this author seems to have such a negative view of the past? Now I think there's some context clues in this passage so that even if you've never opened a Bible before, you might have some idea. But if you have some extra Bible knowledge you want to bring to that question that's totally fine too. Why is it that Paul seems to have such a negative view of the past?

[indistinct audience answers that continue below]

He's done a complete 180. He had, like what we think of traditionally as repentance. He switched around - completely changed his mind - that's what you were going to say too?

He did some really bad things. Yes, so he might want to say "forget the past." Forgetting the past, whatever I've done. What's done is done I'm going to I'm going to forget that.

Yes, he did some bad things and was really proud of having done them yeah absolutely.

His past was tied to adherence to the law and now he's made this this great transition.

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Yeah, I think I hear you saying that he's saying that because he was so tied to that world view it that made his conversion all the more powerful. It sort of set him up to fully understand what he needed in Jesus. Yeah, right?

[end of indistinct audience answers]

I got the sense in reading this and one of the reasons I love doing this on occasion is because the group's wisdom surpasses my own. And I think in both in the first service and in the second service now you have settled on a reading of this that's a little different from where I came from, which was, I was thinking he says he wants to forget the past because it would be such a cause for celebration for him. He doesn't want to dwell on his glory. You see the whole list of things he listed out basically about how good a religious person he was? That happened to be being Jewish for him, obviously, but he was the cream of the crop in all these different ways. Nobody had any more reason to boast than he did. Now he has come to this repentance point where he realizes those are the wrong things to be boasting about. But have you ever met somebody who who hasn't gotten that realization, and the reason they live in the past is because they had some serious past glory? I call it Uncle Rico syndrome. "Back in '82!" Right? That that kind of thing. So maybe it's in part that he doesn't want to dwell on this former glory. It's certainly seems, as you kind of shared, that he also is realizing that that was the wrong thing to celebrate anyway. So given this author's view of the past, what do you think, what do you sense, what did you read or hear in his thinking about the future? Because he does make this pivot from the past to the future: "Forgetting what lies behind I press on toward the goal." What emotion or state would he be in or thinking about the future? He looks toward the future with *blank*. What would fill in the *blank* in that sentence?

[indistinct audience answers that continue below]

Faith, did you say?

Anticipation, Yeah.

Hope, Good.

Zeal. Yeah, does he seem wishy washy about this at all? Paul doesn't really seem wishy washy about much in the scriptures, which makes some of us love him and some of us not so much love him.

[end of indistinct audience answers]

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My word was determination. He's looking toward the future with this confidence and determination and it's, to me, more than even anticipation but expectation. He knows who owns his soul and he knows where he's going in his life.

So that's the first text I wanted to look at. That's a Christian scripture, a New Testament Scripture. I want to look at one of the Hebrew Bible passages from what we call the Old Testament and that's from the lectionary assignments today. Today the lectionary really dropped a nice gift on us here, there's all this nice integration of these texts. This is from Isaiah Chapter 43. I think I have all of that I'm going to read on the screen so you don't need to open it up if you don't want to. Isaiah 43: 18 and 19.

18

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.*

19

*I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Once again a pretty strong statement. Do not remember the former things. And I want to go through this one and think about it the same way we thought about the passage from Philipians, and I want to ask you: why does *this* author seem to have a negative view of the past? This is a much different experience that this person has had than the experience that the Apostle Paul had. Why does *this* author have a negative view of the past so much that he would say "do not remember the former things?" In this case we don't have quite as much in the way of context clues so you might not know the answer at all. This is why I think it's so beneficial to spend a little bit of time understanding when and why books of the Bible were written. Not just memorizing the words in them, although that's wonderful to do, but understanding why they were written, and when, and where, and for what reason. It's really important in this case. We want to know why is he saying don't remember the former things? Well the book of Isaiah, first of all, not all of it was probably written by "Isaiah" Isaiah. The first bit of it was written by the Prophet Isaiah at a certain time and then for probably a couple of centuries at least afterward they kept adding to it in the voice of the prophet Isaiah. And this part of the book seems to have been written during the time when the Israelites had been conquered by the Babylonians, carried out of their land - the promised land that they'd been given - carried out of the holy city of Jerusalem, where the temple where they had worshiped, where they understood God's presence to be localized physically, had been destroyed. And now they're off in exile in Babylon somewhere and the the word of the Lord comes to the prophet Isaiah and Isaiah says to the people "Do not remember the former things."

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Could you imagine why the Israelites might have been remembering the former things? They not only would have been remembering the days of old when they were safe and secure and could worship in their holy city, but they probably also were remembering the horrible days in between where they had been conquered. Where there had been great violence done to them. Where they had been carried away from everything they knew and loved including their God's physical presence and now were in exile. So when when Isaiah says to them: "do not remember the former things," there's a whole lot of baggage that he's basically saying to them: don't dwell in that. So then in this passage, as in the Philippines passage, there's a pivot from the past to the future. And if we had to think about this in the same way, if Isaiah was to say to the people look toward the future with *what*, what would fill in the *blank* this time?

[indistinct audience answers that continue below]

Anticipation. That's the first one that comes to mind for me, yes.

Expectation, Yeah. Because what he says, remember, is, I'm about to a new a do a new thing, see? Do you not perceive it? What else? Look toward the future with...

Optimism. Yes it seems like a very positive, encouragement here. Which, if you think about that again in the context of what's happened to the people at this moment in time.... talk about telling somebody who has lots of reasons not to be optimistic that they should be optimistic!

[end of indistinct audience answers]

So there's two passages so far that seem to have at least a somewhat negative view of the past. One because it would be too tempting to get caught up in the former prestige, or that it would be too tempting to get bogged down in the horrible things that they've done. And in that case the future then is something to be entered with confidence. The confidence that comes with carrying the glory of Christ. And the second passage which seems to be on the whole negative toward the past because, probably, it would be very likely to cause sorrow and anxiety in the hearts of the people. And in that case then the future becomes something to be joyfully anticipated and maybe waited for with some patience. Because, wouldn't it require patience to to look toward a future that's more optimistic when you don't know that it's coming yet?

Now I want to look at a third and final text from the lectionary readings today and see what it has to say about the past. I think it has a little bit of a different take on the past and I wonder what that might have for us. It's the the psalm that was read at the call to worship today. Psalm 126. You can listen to it or if you'd like to turn to page 499 in the red Bibles and read along you are encouraged to do that as well.

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1

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,[a]
we were like those who dream.*

2

*Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”*

3

*The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

4

*Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*

5

*May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*

6

*Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

So what view of the past does the Psalmist take in Psalm 126? Is it on the whole negative as with Philippians 3 and Isaiah 43? No. Actually quite positive, isn't it? It's one of remembrance. Don't forget what God has done! When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion we were like those who dream, our mouths with were filled with laughter. The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoice. And here again for a third time we have a pivot from the past to the future. From thinking about the past in a particular way to thinking about the future in a particular way. What do you think the Psalmist's view of the future seems to be? How would the Psalmist finish that same sentence we've asked the other authors? Look toward the future with...

[indistinct audience answers]

With hope.

With trust. Yes.

[end of indistinct audience answers]

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And why trust? Because there's evidence that God has been present with us in the past. Now, I'll stress again that the timing is everything in this kind of situation. One author writes and thinks about the past negatively because of where the authors is situated on the span of time. Another one writes about the past and writes about a positively because of where they're situated on the span of time. In this case, by the way, this psalm seems very much to me to have been written after the return from exile. When the Persians came through and took over what the Babylonians had started they allowed the Israelites to come back to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. And this is a psalm of ascents - A S C E N T S - like going up. Why is it called a psalm of ascents? Does anybody know?

[indistinct audience answers]

That's right, Jerusalem and the temple is on a hill, so they would sing it as they were going up the hill. I had a college professor ask me - ask the class - that question once and I was like: "Is it because the songs went up to the Lord like incense?" and he's like "That's a really good guess but you're wrong." Yes a Psalm of ascent is when you go up to worship you sing it on the way. And these were people who were remembering that the Lord had restored their fortunes. That they had been carried off into exile, and then that God had brought them back to the holy city. Back to the promised land. And so the Psalmist seems to be encouraging people to look toward the future with trust because of their remembrance of the past. And so to me this text, more so than the other two, is an integrated picture that we can maybe learn from as we think about our own past and our own future. A view of a God who is present with God's people in the past, in the present, and in the future.

So the title: Forget The Past is intentionally a little bit tongue in cheek. Yes, some of us need to forget the past if we have Uncle Rico syndrome. Or if we're going on past glories and we can't get anything done today because we can't stop thinking about what the way it used to be we need to forget the past, right? On a much more challenging and difficult and probably time consuming and taxing way, if we if we are dwelling on past pain and wounds and embarrassment we might want to try to forget the past too. That might require lots of time and therapy and that's OK. But for the most part I think that we as people of faith particularly as a community of faith ought not to forget the past entirely, but rather to remember the past. Remember God's presence and provision with us, so that when we think about the future we can think about it with anticipation and joy and confidence and trust that God will be with us no matter what comes, just as God was with us all along. And I love that we get this most integrated picture first of all in a song. I love that the best, in my view, like, the most integrated picture is from the song, right? Being a musician and loving music and finding truth in that particular art form, it gives me joy to see that this is the way shook out in this case. But I also

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love that the Psalmist is addressing a community of people. And this is what I want to leave you with because, yes, it might be hard to forget the past. Yes, it might be terrifying to think of the future. Yes, there might be days when you alone by yourself cannot do that. But the beauty and purpose of being in spiritual community with each other is, among many other things, in part that we get to bear one another's burdens. That if there is a day when I cannot, I *cannot even*. If there's a day when I can't look to the past and see God's hand, if it's just darkness to me, and therefore can't move into the future with confidence or with trust, it gives me reassurance to know that there's a whole community of people here with me, and that some of you are on the other side of the the sine wave of life's experiences. So you're on the side where you are remembering God's presence and goodness, and you can take my hand and bear me up and carry me along the way. And the next time that needs to be done our roles might be reversed and that is what community looks like. So let us move forward into a future with a good God who is with us, who loves us, and let us move forward into the future with confidence and joy because we move forward together as a community of faith.

Let's pray together. God, we come to these scriptures, some of us, lamenting our past. Some of us stuck in our past, some of us reliving our past. We've come, some of us, fearful of the future. Some of us, anticipating the future, some of us excited, some of us afraid. Each one of us comes to these stories with something different and we're grateful to you for the the breadth of picture that we get from these three scriptural accounts. And we pray that you would help us to remember your presence with us in the past, particularly when it's difficult to see your presence with us now. Help us to trust you and to move forward into the future with confidence. And Lord most of all, help us to be present and real with each other. Allow us to be your presence and realness for each other as we experience this beloved community as your body. Make it true for us and real for us we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Well we are going to take communion in just a moment and your kids, who are in the classrooms, you're invited to bring them down for communion or right after communion. Artisan's communion is an open table which means that all of you are welcomed to come and partake of this sacrament, this means of grace. Take a piece of the bread to remember Christ's body which is broken for you. Dip it in one of the cups, remembering Christ's blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. May it be the real presence of Jesus the savior. May it be sustenance on your spiritual journey, and may it be an act of unity with each other. As we continue to worship in song and prayer and sacrament respond as the Holy Spirit leads you. Amen.

[end of sermon]

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[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com