

Date: March 25, 2007

SUNDAY: Lent 5

SERMON: Remembering the Future

Text(s): Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

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I'm sure many of us have seen the current (very bad, in my humble opinion) TV commercial for *Direct TV*, featuring Christopher Lloyd in a reprise of his role as the mad scientist Doc Brown from the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*. Arriving back in the present from his time travel into the past, he shouts, "Great Scott! I forgot to tell Marty about Direct TV."

The fascination with traveling backward or forward in time has been with us a lot longer than that trilogy of movies from the 80's or its current reincarnation in the TV commercial. Part of our fascination with the notion of time travel is that virtually all of our lives consists of either the past or the future. The present moment is just that, a fleeting moment that with every tick of the clock passes into the past, while the future rushes toward us in that same tick of the clock.

Although his definition probably wouldn't satisfy a theoretical physicist, theologian Robert Jenson has defined time as that which begins with our birth and ends with our death. It's certainly a provocative and existentially true definition, isn't it? In a very real sense, all of time is carried within our brains. When we're young, most of time is ahead of us. We always have the sense that we're moving toward something, we're preparing for something that is still to come. We start training our children as toddlers to practice good table manners because we're preparing them for life as adults in the future. We go to school to learn things that fill our brains with the knowledge, and hopefully some of the wisdom, of generations before us so that we will be equipped for the future that awaits us. We learn skills in school or in apprenticeships that are supposed to help us in the future to have a satisfying or lucrative (or sometimes even both) career or profession. But when we're young, all of that is still ahead.

As we get older, more and more of time is in the past. We have traveled through time so that most of our life now resides in that part of our brains that we call memory. Most of time is now behind us. When we're 60 or 70 we don't live with the same sense of anticipation of the future that we did when we were 20, do we? We remember far more than we anticipate. To a large extent, we are what we remember on the one hand, and what we anticipate on the other. Which is why Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia are so frightening to us. Who are we when our memories no longer function, when we are forced by the physiology of our brains to exist in some eternal present moment, always experiencing, but never having experienced, and never able either to anticipate? No past and no future; only the eternal present.

The time past that we travel to in our minds is where most of our troubles come from, too, isn't it? There would be no need for therapists if we never got stuck in the past. But we do get stuck in the past. Past experiences keep somehow reappearing in our present, conveyed by the time travel machine we call our brains. Something happens in our present that triggers a memory— either a conscious memory or an unconscious one— and we often act on the basis of that memory rather than on the basis of the situation as it exists in the present moment. This can be both good and bad; when it's good, we usually call it the wisdom of experience. When it's bad, we call it neurotic behavior.

We all know how hard it is to come to terms with our past, don't we? It's there; it's us. Part of our anticipation of the future, particularly when we're younger, is precisely because we don't have enough of a past yet to have been as deeply shaped by it as we will by the time we reach mid-life or our senior years. So much more of our being has the nature of potential rather than actuality. Which is why, when we're young, we tend to live our lives facing forward, while when we get older, we tend to live facing backward. That's where most of what makes us "us" is— in time past.

All this is simply what we call mortality. It's what makes us mortal— being bound to and by time— that boundary that frames our being between birth and death. It's what distinguishes us from God. And since being bound to and by time is what distinguishes us from God, it's natural that we should be somewhat obsessed with time. We'll always be traveling back to the past because that's where we increasingly exist as we go through life.

God, however, is not bound to time nor bounded by it as we are. In fact, as our Old Testament lesson today makes clear, God's mode of being is, from our perspective, the future. And God always is beckoning us forward toward what is not yet. The full realization of our humanity is not to be found in our past, but in a future that is yet to be revealed, and which we can only grasp by anticipation. This is, I think, what St. Paul means when he says, "*We are saved in hope.*" To have hope is to be a living and functioning human beings. We are not dead if we can still hope. The opposite of hope is despair, and despair was considered by the old saints to be the most serious sin of all. We cannot arrive at the future that God is calling us to if we do not have hope.

The anonymous prophet whom we call II Isaiah wrote to a people whose present and past was such that they were in danger of losing all hope of a future, of falling into despair. The whole dimension of anticipation had dropped out of their lives. They were in exile, far from their homeland, far from Jerusalem, far from their temple and the things that formed their sense of identity as the people of God. They were under the heel of a foreign imperial power— the Babylonian empire. Their whole existence as a people, their whole sense of identity was now part of the past— a past that they continued to cling to in their individual and collective memories. One of their poets gave voice to this experience in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept,

We wept when we remembered Zion.

*On the willows there, we hung up our harps,
and our captors there required of us songs,
saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion,"*

*But how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign
land?*

Now that's the expression of really living in the past, isn't it? I daresay that all of us could point to some time in our lives when we have felt that hopeless about the future, that strong a feeling of being trapped in the past by our memories with no way back to the future.

It could be the result of past traumatic childhood experiences or painful betrayals of a friendship or relationship or long-nurtured resentments or a painful loss that just keeps on giving us fresh gifts of grief like a wound that never heals. There are all sorts of reasons why we get trapped back there in time past. But we do. All of us do, or will at some point. We get stuck.

But that fact about us— what some of the ancients spoke of as "the wound of our mortality" need not be the final word. It was not the final word for those exiles down in Babylon. The word of the Lord came to them through the prophet who had accompanied them into exile:

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert . . . to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise."

"Do not remember the former things; I am doing a new thing." The cure for getting stuck in the past is to remember the future, or more precisely, to remember the God who calls us toward a future. If we are what we remember, then we need to remember to forget some things in order to get ourselves unstuck.

And that's the hard part, isn't it? It's why

some people spend years in therapy learning what things to remember and what things to forget. Forgetting is one of the hardest things to do.

Oh, I know, you're thinking that forgetting is one of the easiest things to do, and it becomes easier with each year we get older. We can forget all sorts of things very easily— where we put our car keys, what we were supposed to get at the grocery store. It's why we live by our Palm Pilots and our calendars; otherwise, we'd forget where we're supposed to be and when. We forget our mother's birthday or our own wedding anniversary. We forget all sorts of important things.

But that's not the sort of forgetting I'm talking about, nor the kind that Isaiah's talking about. I'm not talking about ordinary forgetfulness of all the thousand things we need to keep track of. I'm talking about forgetting those things that now belong to our past, and that prevent us from ever getting out of the past and facing toward the future with hope and anticipation. Those are the things we need to forget. And it's not easy. The more past we have, the harder it can be. Sometimes, it's because those things have gotten buried under so many other things that belong to our past, that it takes a great deal of effort, much of it painful, to root around and unearth them. And since few of us enjoy pain, we tend to avoid digging them up until they surface themselves and cause us even more pain, and we're forced to deal with them. We're stuck in the past because we can't turn around to face the future. In this case, forgetting often is tied to forgiving— either forgiving ourselves or forgiving others before the process of forgetting can begin to happen.

But sometimes, it's not something painful in the past that prevents us from forgetting, but our fear of the future, of change. The past may be where we find our sense of security, of comfort, of identity, and we don't want to give that up. Change, which is to say, the invasion of our present by the future, is, or can be, unsettling.

The past becomes our refuge. We don't face the future because we don't want to, not because the past prevents us from doing so. Forgetting the former things, in this case, means finding the faith and courage from our memories of the past that will enable us to turn around and face forward rather than backward.

I find that this is a particularly common pattern in churches. It's often given expression in that line that some wag has dubbed, the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." Past practice may be a clue to how we ought to respond in the present, but it can just as easily be a ball-and-chain that prevents us from seeing or moving toward the future.

Whether it's being stuck in a painful past or being stuck in a hallowed past, we're still stuck. And neither is consistent with living in faith and hope. Faith and hope are, by definition, words that belong to the future. Faith is trust, and trust is always oriented toward what has not yet happened, but what may happen. To trust someone, whether it's our spouse or our parent or our friend or God is to be open to the future. And hope is the expectation that our trust will bear fruit. Both faith and hope are vital to our survival. Faith and hope are possible when we can forget what lies behind and reach forward to what lies ahead.

During our years in Paris, one of the major ministries of our church was to people who had been uprooted from their familiar routines and lives and who found themselves, by choice or by chance, in a foreign country and culture. Whether they were working for a company that sent them to France or whether they were college students coming for their junior-year abroad or whether they were refugees from the brutal civil wars in a variety of African nations, they found themselves in a place where their familiar routines, their familiar places, their familiar relationships and their native language were all replaced by new places, new faces, new routines, and hearing around them a language they

couldn't understand. It was a profoundly disorienting experience. And people reacted to that experience in a variety of ways. Some became profoundly depressed or even suicidal. Some were simply nervous and anxious about how they would survive and thrive in this new place. Some were positively exuberant: "Wow! I get to live in Paris for two years. Let me at it!" Some came with high expectations and went home within six months because they couldn't let go of their past life.

So our women's group led a program called "Bloom Where You're Planted," in which we gave a three-day survival course to about 300 newly arrived English-speaking expatriates each year. The whole message of the "Bloom" program was "Don't cling to the past; if you do, you'll spend however long a time you have in France being unhappy. Look to the future. Look at the opportunity you have to grow, to enlarge your knowledge and appreciation of the world beyond what you already know. Look at the chance you've been given to break free of past habits of life that have been unproductive and re-invent yourself. Don't spend your time pining for the coffee shop or your hairdresser in Peoria or Portland; take a French course, take a course in French cooking, avail yourself of the opportunity to learn about our Western heritage in art and architecture and civilization that is all around you. While we had lots of speakers and resource people to flesh out those opportunities, a major component of the program was helping people to realize that just as they had physically journeyed from America or Australia or Ghana or Singapore, so they were on a spiritual journey as well. God had been with them in their home country, and God was already in France when they arrived. So they could be open to the future with faith and hope and discover God's presence with them in Paris through all the new challenges and new directions and new opportunities they faced.

Happily, most people, after some struggle,

did exactly that.

To be a Christian is to live oriented toward the future, because that's where we find God. When we find ourselves stuck in the past, either because of the pain of past experiences or because we're looking for our security back there somewhere, we need to remember the future, to remember the God who calls us from the future. For that is where we will find, both healing for the pain of the past and the true security for our lives that we long for. We may not know what tomorrow holds, but we do know Who holds tomorrow. And in that knowledge is our hope.