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Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 13 November 2022, Remembrance Sunday

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Sermon starts: 40:48

Readings: Isaiah 75:16-25, Luke 21:5-19

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9IDPsa_j44>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.

This past two weeks seem to have had us doing a lot of “remembering”. All Saints, as I said last week, is the festival to remember the great saints and martyrs of the faith; All Souls, which a few of us were able to observe at the Thursday Eucharist, also remembers those who have gone before us; and on Friday our nation stopped to remember the war dead from the two World Wars, the so-called “Great War” – war can never be great – and the second World War, and Korea; as well as a handful of other conflicts now, which have seen military action by Canadians. Every year in this calendar frame, we do this: All Saints, All Souls, Armistice Day. So much to recall, so much to regret, so many to mourn – and yet, so much for which to be thankful.

In the lesson from Isaiah, we hear some of Jewish scripture’s good news: “I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad, and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and the people as a delight, and the wolf and the lamb shall feed together. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

“The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” – this is counter, of course, to George Santayana’s famous line, “Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.” Of course, there is a place for remembering or at least recalling. The word *remember* has some powerful roots: to re-member is to make a past moment once again a member of the present. At the altar, when we recite the words of Jesus: “Do this to remember Me,” that is a very deliberate act of making the risen Jesus a member of this present table fellowship. That’s his promise to us. We can remember Him. What a gift that is.

By the same token, we know the destructive power, the negative power, that memories can hold. Victims of abuse or trauma of all kinds can fall into a pattern of making a member of their present a moment of their past. This is the underlying cause of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The past event was so powerful and injurious that it continues to force itself into our present – into our feelings, into our thoughts, even into our physical sensations. The goal of therapy is to help the sufferer, not to forget, but to rid the memory of its power to take over the present. From remembering with pain to recalling, without allowing that pain to take over: that’s the path of healing. To simply recall is to affirm that you know that something took place; we can’t stay in denial. But when we’re doing that roll-call of events past, we don’t have to relive them. Being able to recall trauma without remembering and reliving it is the path of the ministry of the church known as “the healing of memories”.

Let me tell you of an instant where a terrible memory held someone for a long time in its power. I was asked, by a friend of hers, to visit this woman. When I knocked on the door, it opened a crack, and there were these frightened eyes looking out from an ashen face, an unkempt, hunched-over person. After a brief introduction and a brief visit, she agreed to come to my office. She shuffled, moving as if she were arthritic, or had scoliosis. She talked of her depression, her loneliness, and her sense of deep unworthiness. Of course, I suspected abuse, and we questioned her whole life, and it turned out there was no-one that she could remember that had ever laid a hand on her. I was quite puzzled, and finally in one session I started asking about her childhood before elementary school. Where did she live? Could she remember the colour of her bed cover, her favourite stuffed toy? What could she see out her bedroom window? Gradually, the memories started coming, and finally she started to cry. And she told me of the first day she was allowed outside after a bout of chickenpox. She had scabs and marks on her face still; she was in the back lane because the blackberry bush had berries on it. Some older neighbour children came by and saw her, and started chanting, “Yah-yah, scab-face! Yah-yah, scab-face!” And she remembered that. She knew from when she had moved from that town , that she was under four [at the time of that memory]. The most painful part of her memory was running in to her mother, in tears, who was too busy in the kitchen to notice or respond with the comfort that this heartbroken three-year-old needed. At this point in the interview, she really began to sob. After she stopped, I prayed a simple vision prayer, in which we saw Jesus holding his arm around the three-year-old little girl in that back lane, with his other hand hushing the other children, and then drawing them all in together to hug each other, and then walking with her into her kitchen and helping her mother with the chores, filling the kitchen with his love – which smelled a little bit like fresh-baked cookies. Then we sat for a long time in silence. This woman made one more appointment to come, but she didn’t keep that appointment. I lost track of her. Then about six months later I was at the local mall and I noticed an attractive, well-groomed woman with a brisk and graceful step, walking towards me. I thought, “I wonder who that is?” And not until she came closer did I realize that it was this same person. The memory of that event, so minor to her mother but so huge to her, had been reformed, healed. The power of Jesus’ love had removed the power of the pain. It was amazing. And I think that’s what Isaiah meant when he said, “I’m about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be re-membered or come to mind.”

The new thing that Isaiah saw coming from Yahweh was a practice of justice and compassion and love which would usher in a world in which God’s presence would not depend on temples and rituals, but on the way people’s caring for one another would remove all causes of pain and hurt: a world of peace.

In my work with Dawson Heights Housing, we have a phrase that we use to describe our work: we call it “a campus of care”. Our staff care for the residents, the board cares for the staff and the residents: a campus of care. The new thing Isaiah promises and the world for which Jesus says, “not a hair of your head will perish,” even though there is great suffering and persecution – that world is God’s campus of care. We live in God’s campus of care. We’re held always in the loving arms of God: that’s the truth. Whatever will happen to us, that is the truth. Even those who suffered the horrors of those conflicts we recalled on Friday and earlier this morning were in God’s campus of care. Juno Beach was part of it, where so many Canadians ran headlong into enemy fire and were killed or injured – they were still in God’s campus of care.

I want to end this time of reflection with a song about God’s love – I’m told it hasn’t been used here, so I’ll just sing it, and if you do know it, please feel free to join me.

[Music – [This Ancient Love](https://www.carolynmcdademusic.com/AWSL_lyrics.pdf), Carolyn McDade.]