

"IS YOUR MEMORY GOING?"

A Sermon By

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## "IS YOUR MEMORY GOING?"

INTRODUCTION        The title of today's sermon, "Is Your Memory Going?" provided the opportunity for a few jokes around the Church office this past week. But I can't remember any of them.

Occasionally I have a problem with memory. More and more, I have to write things down, make lists all the time, every day. I don't know what I'd do without a secretary and one or two others who remind me what I was supposed to be doing on this day. My excuse is that I'm a preacher and I've always got next week's sermon on my mind, some forty weeks of the year. When you have limited capacity that's about all your mind has room for, I guess. It's like a professor at one of our universities that I recently heard about. He was an ichthyologist, and he complained that every time he memorized the name of a fish he forgot the name of a student.

DEVELOPMENT        If we focus on one thing too much we're going to forget all other things. That's the way our minds work. Concentration on one thing is bad for the memory. You ought to remember that. Here's a story about a man who had both ears bandaged. Somebody asked him what happened. He said, "Well, I was watching the Monday night Football Game on television, concentrating on it, and my wife happened to be ironing, standing next to me. The phone rang and I reached for it and got the iron instead and put it up to my ear". The man asked, "What happened to the other ear?" "Well", he said, "The guy phoned back."

You concentrate too hard and it's going to ruin your memory. That may be my problem, I don't know. But I do know this. There is no progress without memory. You can see that on the most elementary level of human development. Not many people put irons to their ears twice. God has created us with a memory so that we can learn from our experiences and grow, become better persons. Painful experiences teach us something, hopefully. We won't do that again. That's called "negative reinforcement", and an awful lot of human evolution has come about through negative reinforcement. There is no progress without memory.

Great civilizations are those with great memories. They are the ones with the libraries. Libraries are memory banks. They store the wisdom of the ages. We are civilized to the extent that we remember what has gone on before - the great music and the art, the literature, the great ideas of all civilizations - and let our own lives be enriched by the contributions that others before us have made to the vast treasury of human knowledge.

There's no progress without memory. In fact, I think you can say this. I think you can say that we move forward by looking backwards. That is to say, our image of the past, our idea of the past, what happened there, equips us for the present. So that if we were ever to lose our memory our life would be diminished. In fact, if we were ever to lose memory our life would be threatened.

A PARABLE        I came across a parable about that in a sermon written by a colleague. It was from a story by the Latin American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Ever since Marquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature four years ago, I've been wanting to read his novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude from which this parable is taken.

The story is set in an isolated town in Latin America surrounded by a swamp. The town's name is Macondo and the people who live there live in relative innocence. In fact, no one has died in the town of Macondo as the story begins.

One day an Indian woman arrives in the town. She is fleeing from her village where there has been an outbreak of the plague of insomnia. The Buendia family hire her as their maid and cook. Sure enough, one day they notice that one of the girls in their family cannot sleep. They know that the plague now has come to their family. Quickly it spreads throughout Macondo.

As first they think this isn't going to be so bad, because after all, if we don't sleep then we have more time to enjoy the good things of life. Also, the body doesn't seem to feel any fatigue at all with this insomnia. It's later they discover that in the latter stages of the disease the chief symptom is loss of memory. First, the recollection of childhood is erased, then the names and nature of things, and then finally the identity of people, and eventually the awareness of one's own being fades until the victim sinks into a kind of idiocy that has no past.

One of the sons in the Buendia family devised a plan to fight the loss of memory. He discovered it by chance. He's a silversmith, and he looks for the vice he uses to laminate metals. He can't remember the name of it. He asks his father. His father tells him the name and writes it on a slip of paper and pastes it to the base of the anvil. In that way he would not forget its name in the future.

A few days later he discovered he had trouble remembering the names of other things in his shop, and so he began to write their names down and paste them onto the objects. And then his father confessed that he, too, was a victim and was losing his memory. The son shared with his father the plan and they went around the house labeling all the objects, and then out into the yard and put signs around the animals. "This is a cow". "This is a horse".

And then it occurred to them that the day would come when they would be able to read the names of the objects on the inscription but not know their use. So he was more explicit from then on. He would write the name and then what it was to be used for. He hung a sign around the cow that read, "This is a cow. She is to be milked every morning."

And at the beginning of the road coming out of the swamp they put up a large sign that said Macondo, the name of the town, and another larger one on the main street of the town, that read, "God exists", lest they forget.

That's a parable. The disease that threatens human life may not be insomnia, but whatever it is, its symptom is the loss of memory.

#### THANKSGIVING SUNDAY

This is Thanksgiving Sunday, the national holiday only a few days away. Thanksgiving is like a sign on the main street of this nation that says, "God exists". It's the only holiday we have in this nation that is explicitly religious. It's as if it came right out of the Old Testament. That is to say, it resembles those festivals based on historical events in the past that tell the story in such a way it becomes the definitive event for the nation.

Our Old Testament lesson from the Book of Deuteronomy is like that. It's the story of the beginning of the nation Israel, how God freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt and took them miraculously across the Red Sea, guided them through the desert wilderness of the Exodus and led them to a Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And the text that we read is in that part where the people are reminded to tell the story. They are told they must always tell the story...

"Lest when you have eaten and are full and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold are multiplied then you forget that it was the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and led you through the wilderness and fed you with manna and brought you to a Promised Land. Beware lest you forget this and say in your heart my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. If you forget this, if you lose your memory, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish."

The plague that hit the town of Macondo is universal. Call it what you will, its chief symptom is loss of memory. And the way you fight it is to remember God exists and remember what He has done for you.

That's what Thanksgiving is all about. Thanksgiving is a sign in our life on Main Street of the nation that says God exists. It reminds us of our beginnings. It says this nation didn't just happen. This nation happened because of grace, and it prospered because of providence, and it endured until this day because of mercy. That's the meaning of the story.

Thanksgiving wasn't celebrated until 1789, and then not really as a national holiday to be observed every year until 1863, because that's when our memory began to fail us. It was established so that we would tell the story lest we forget and think that it was our power and the strength of our arm that gave us this wealth.

#### THE STORY FOR US

And so we tell the story. It's a simple story. One hundred and two people left Plymouth, England on a ship called the Mayflower. They left later than they should have. They left on September 6th, just when the North Atlantic begins to rage against all those who would travel across her. So the voyage was stormy. They were lucky to get across it at all. In one storm the main timber of the ship buckled.

But the storms outside were only slightly more perilous than the storm that raged inside among the passengers, 102 of them. Forty-one of them were Separatists from the Church of England. They were among those who called themselves the "Saints" on the pattern of the New Testament Church. They were going to America to seek freedom of worship. But the rest were adventurers seeking a land of economic opportunity. The two groups didn't get along, but out of their voyage together came the Mayflower Compact, the model of what was to become democratic government.

The passage across the Atlantic, they said, was like the Hebrews' crossing of the Red Sea. It was said it was a miracle that they got across at all. After nine weeks they rested anchor off Cape Cod. They were 200 miles off course when

they did that. They were supposed to land in New York, but they had no time now to correct their error. It was November 11th and they had only a short time to make provision for the Winter. So for three weeks they combed the beaches of Cape Cod, and what they found they said was like "manna". They found fresh water, as from the "flinty rock" which they had expected. But they also found a store of Indian seed corn and beans. They packed it all up and in a snowstorm set sail once again for a harbor and landed finally at what they called Plymouth.

And there were more surprises, surprises that they never could have anticipated. They found an Indian village abandoned. Three years before an epidemic had swept through the village and wiped it out. The neighboring Wampanoag Indians had not claimed it, perhaps because they had put some taboo on the village. At any rate, it was there, habitable and yet uninhabited. It was incredible, as if it were constructed for them. A ghost town waiting there on a safe harbor.

But the most astonishing thing of all happened next. Those saints who thought of their pilgrimage to this point as being like the Hebrew Exodus across the Red Sea and the desert now said that what happened next was a re-enactment of Joseph and his brothers: Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers in Egypt and later magnanimously feeding them when they were starving. For into their camp from nowhere walked an Indian who had been kidnapped by English fishermen several years before and taken to England. He had lived in England for a number of years and finally returned to America just six months before the Pilgrims landed. He knew the land, and he knew how to plant the seed that they had found, and he knew how to catch fish in the streams. And he knew English. His name was Squanto and he remained with the Pilgrims for the rest of his life.

AMAZING It's amazing. And even with Squanto it was difficult. A lot of lives were lost that Winter. But with the planting, in time came the harvest. And to each family a generous allotment of codfish and venison and cornmeal and turkeys and all that the land produced, so that everybody had plenty. And being who they were - those saints - and remembering Deuteronomy, they decided that they have a festival of thanksgiving. So Governor Bradford sent hunters out to find more meat, and messengers to Chief Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoags, to join them. And the chief came for the celebration with ninety braves. And for three days they celebrated and played games and gave thanks to God.

And that's the story. And it could have come out of Deuteronomy. It says God exists, and that is why you have what you have today. That's why you are even here today - because of God and His providence. So remember that. Because you're inclined to forget that sort of thing. You're inclined to think that my power and the strength of my hand have gotten me these things.

OUR STORY If that's the nation's story it is also your story and my story. You look back over the course of your life and see if there are not the same kinds of coincidences and good fortune and surprises and gifts that occurred in your life as occurred in the life of the Pilgrims. You think about that. It's going to be hard to think of it because you tend to forget those things.

I heard about a cartoon in Punch. It showed a man kneeling at his bed saying his prayers. "Dear God, is there some way that you could help me and make it look like I did it myself?" Well, you know something, He does that. That's the way He works. He does it so that if you want to boast of it, if you want to boast of being a self-made man or woman, you can do it. And some will believe you, those who labor under the same myth, those who believe that it is possible that you can do anything by yourself, they'll believe you. They have the same problem with memory that you may have.

But there are others who know what it was really like. Who were there, who may have been with you all the way. They know how much credit you really deserve and how much ought to go to somebody else, maybe even to them. But they don't say anything about it. They knew the times when you almost gave up and the times when you blew it. They knew when you fell and someone else lifted you. They knew, because they were there. They encouraged you. They stood by you. It's hard to remember that.

And they knew this. They don't say anything about it, but they know that what you did in the limelight you did because an awful lot of people do what they do in the background. And you didn't even know that. But they knew about it. You couldn't delight in what you've done if they weren't faithful in what they do.

And you've forgotten this. I'm sure, however, that you can find somebody who would remind you. You've forgotten that your life is as much a series of good fortune and happy circumstances and just plain luck as it is your power and the strength of your hand that has gotten you your success.

CLOSING SECTION      If you are religious, you see those things and you don't call them good fortune or luck, either. You call it providence. And you see it as a sign that God blesses you and guides you and cares for you. And you know, if you're religious, that therefore you'd better give thanks to God. And how do you do that?

Let me suggest that you throw a party. Do it this Thursday. Give thanks to God in the midst of plenty. There's a good national precedent for doing that. But there's also a Biblical precedent on how to say thanks to God. It says that there's a better way of doing it, and that is to be as kind and merciful and generous to others as God has been to you.

There's a story of a boy going off to college. He was an orphan so he was raised by his aunt and uncle. They are there in the train station with him as he is going off to college. The train whistle blows, the conductor says, "All aboard!" The boy grabs his aunt's and uncle's hands and blurts out, "How can I ever repay you?" The uncle says something about parents and their love for children. The boy says, "No, no". "I will always be trying to repay you". And the aunt says, "What your uncle means is that a parent's love is not to be paid back. It's to be passed on...."

If your memory serves you well you will recall all that you have received and want to say thanks. You can't pay it back. You can't do that. If you pay back what is given then it's not a gift. All you can do, if you remember, is to give to somebody else. And if you do, then you and your descendants will live long in the land! And so may it be. Amen!

## WASHINGTON

James Reston

# Thanks For What?

WASHINGTON

**N**o thoughtful citizen of the United States can reflect on the sufferings of the world in the year 1985 without counting the blessings of America on Thanksgiving Day.

It was a year of natural disasters in Mexico and Colombia; of famine in Ethiopia and sub-Saharan Africa that could take more lives than the first World War; of calamitous wars along the Persian Gulf and in Southeast Asia; of racial violence in South Africa and terrorism in the skies and seas.

It was also a year of widespread unemployment in Western Europe (12.6 million in September), of millions of refugees scrambling from one country to another, often illegally, of political tension and of an arms race costing over \$700 billion in this year alone.

Even though glimpses of this appalling human sorrow and carnage were more vivid on our television screens this year than ever before, the magnitude of the human tragedy and the cost of containing it is still almost beyond comprehension.

Yet it may be useful in this age of drift and hallucination to recall the foundations of the first Thanksgiving Day celebrations.

The Puritans were undoubtedly motivated primarily by gratitude for survival, but also by something more. They were rooted in the conviction that their prosperity had come from their industry, discipline and virtue and not their virtue from their prosperity.

More than that, they believed that they were their brothers' keepers and had survived by helping one another; that they were the trustees for future generations and were to set an example for a civilized world.

Later the Jeffersonians argued that

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## Lippmann's 'forgotten foundation of democracy' needs work

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these principles were a practical guide to life; for if each citizen found contentment in a justly and richly rewarded toil, that citizen would not be disposed to take advantage of his neighbor.

Even this secular age would have to agree that this older spiritual shield is worth preserving while the scientists produce a nuclear shield for their own promised land.

For if, in our clash of philosophy with the Communist states, we say that the individual does not belong to the state, it is necessary to keep defining what the individual does belong to. The people are listening in the Communist Empire and elsewhere.

The Puritans sensed it, but the Founding Fathers defined it better than anybody before or since. They said man belonged to his Creator, and since man was, therefore, an immortal soul, he possessed inalienable rights as a person and was honor bound under constitutional representative government to respect the rights of others and practice the courtesy of the spirit.

Walter Lippmann called this "the forgotten foundation of democracy," and wondered if democracy could endure at home or withstand its enemies abroad unless it remembered where it came from.

"The decay of decency in the modern age," he wrote, "the rebellion against law and good faith, the treatment of human beings as things, as mere instruments of power and ambition, is without a doubt the consequence of the decay of the belief in man as something more than an animal animated by highly conditioned reflexes and chemical reactions. . . .

"If you teach a people that the character of its government is not greatly important, that political success is for those who equivocate and evade; that acquisitiveness is the ideal, that Mammon is God, then you must not be astonished at the confusion in Washington. . . . You cannot set up false Gods to confuse the people and not pay the penalty."

Here endeth the lesson. It was not intended by Lippmann as a sermon — he died without religious faith — but it was meant as a warning that a secular society that forgets its roots is in danger of losing the spirit that holds a nation together.

There has been much evidence in recent years of confusion over what defends a nation. The overwhelming emphasis has been on military power, which was necessary, but at the expense of many other attributes of national security.

The nation has much to give thanks for this week: 107,867,000 employed, and perhaps the beginnings, but only the beginnings, of reduced tension with the Soviet Union.

But 8,291,000 unemployed; the largest debt in the history of the Republic; chaos on our Southern borders; and, by the Reagan Administration's own figures, over 33 million Americans living below the official poverty line? And a hungry world that could soon be spending a trillion dollars a year on weapons?

We have a democratic system to be thankful for. But what about the forgotten foundation? □