



Its Not About the Past

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Mat 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8

How quickly we forget. Our collective memory too often extends only as far as our individual memories. We set aside our knowledge of national events such as the Great Depression. We forget the realities of life prior to the Model T. We can't seem to recall that people in Amherst County lived without indoor plumbing as little as 15 years ago. Even so, we can get so wrapped up in the past that we forget about responding to present realities with purpose toward a definite future. How can we respect our past while looking forward to the future into which God calls us?

Can you believe there was a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph? That would be like forgetting we had been through the Great Depression, the Conservation Corps, Civil War, or Pearl Harbor. It is like the new generation believing that our current economic condition is the worst our nation has ever seen. If I did not experience it, then it must never have happened.

I wasn't there at the Alamo. I did not see the runs on the banks when my grandparents were newly-weds. I never knew the unavailability of cars or motorized mass transportation. I was not there when the sanitation workers went on strike or when schools first became integrated in this country. I never witnessed a segregated society, or the cutting and storing of ice from the Woodson's Mill pond. The American Cyanamid plant in Piney River is not part of my memory.

Among the Hebrews, there were those enmeshed in lamenting the loss of "the good old days." As we are so often wont to do, they glorified the past in certain aspects and forgot the rougher parts. They looked back to the glory of their national favor within Egypt while glossing over having to learn a new language, a new culture, and a different way of life in a new location. Some were so concerned with the loss of a privileged heritage they discarded any thought of a future.

It is good to remember. That is what Psalm 124 tells us, in many ways. We can look back on how God faithfully provided in the past. We can see how in our past fears and difficulties God remained faithful. The point of memory is not that we live in the past, however. It is to grant hope for our present and future. It reminds us that as God was faithful, God is faithful, and God will remain faithful.

The new Pharaoh did not know Joseph. Joseph was not part of his memory, now had he heard or deemed Joseph's story of any importance. He likely represented an invading dynasty taking over in Egypt and displacing much in Egyptian heritage with other concerns. Joseph's contribution was no longer deemed important and the Hebrew people were just a threat to power and a workforce to utilize for the purpose of expanding rule and prominence.

In the midst of worrying about loss of a past, there were some who decided to do something about a future. Amid a life of forced labor building supply cities for this new Pharaoh with no loyalty to the heritage and contributions of Joseph, midwives and mothers hid their Hebrew sons to protect them for a future that God would bring about.

They were bound to be discovered. There is only so long you can hide the protection of male babies. At some point, boys grow up and live no longer in the shadows. It was a scenario born of desperation, yet they were actions that sprang not from despair, but from hope itself. Perhaps Pharaoh

did not know Joseph, but it was God who had sent Joseph to Egypt. If their past had been glorious, it had been so not for Pharaoh's doing, but God's. If the past had depended upon God's action, the future depended on God as well. They chose to do their part and watch to see how God would bring about a new redemption.

Faith does not ignore the past. Neither is faith lived simply as a reflection on the past. Faith builds on the past of God's action and provision to march us into the uncharted future of God's new provision. It challenges us to find courage from our past to trust God for the uncertainties in our present and future circumstances.

When Moses was hidden in a basket of rushes at the river, no one knew what would become of this little baby boy. Being found by the princess was an unknown quantity. Not knowing how God would act, however, was no excuse for inaction or failing to address the present. Faith called for confidence in the midst of uncertainty. It called for living with the understanding that God would be faithful still.

Jesus called on his disciples with a couple of questions. "What is the current talk about me?" was the first. The second was, "What conclusions have you come up with about me?" Peter the answer the disciples had likely been discussing already. "You are the Anointed, the Son of the Living God!" After affirming Peter's answer and declaring this statement the foundation of the church, Jesus went to address the issue of "what now?"

The disciples had been watching Jesus. They had seen the things he had done, heard his teaching, and lived with him for some time. They had come to some conclusions. They had expectations for Messiah. They had imaginative pictures of life in the Messianic Reign. Jesus had a different direction to set forward. He did not want them proclaiming him publicly as Messiah, for they did not yet understand that that really meant. In the meantime, he gave faith a task. The gates of hell would now be worthless against the assault of faith.

This was a very different picture of the Messianic Reign. It was not the walls and gates of the Messianic Reign that would keep the outsiders at bay. Rather, it was the march of faith that would gain entrance even through the portals of hell itself. Where, then, would the disciples and church march to extend the redemptive action of God among perils all around?

Paul focused it this way. As the body of Christ in the world, we are called on to present ourselves to God as living sacrifices. We are called to a mission and purpose. We are not enlisted to reflect on our past experiences with God, but to advance the mission and cause of Christ in accordance with how God has empowered us. As God has gifted us, we are charged with trusting God's gifting to transform our lives into representatives of the presence of Christ Jesus.

As those Hebrew women giving birth to sons against Pharaoh's edict, how will we recognize the presence of God in our lives? It only does so much good to consider where God has taken us in the past. Faith calls us to confront the present with confidence in God's provision. It is a provision not for our survival alone, but teeming with hope for a victorious redemption to share with an entire world. We can live fretting about the loss of some glorified past. We can march confidently forward, recognizing God's calling us into His future. After all, it's not just about the past. It is also the story yet unwritten.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*