



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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### **“A Gracious Lapse of Memory”**

*(Jeremiah 31:34)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:34).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

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As a pastor, forgetting things is a major occupational hazard. A bad memory causes a lot of embarrassment in this vocation. Once I forgot the name of the bride I was marrying. “Jim will you have . . . will you have this woman standing here to be your wife?” Once I a wedding, a funeral and a service all on one Saturday. I left one of those sermons behind in my office and didn’t realize it until I stepped into the pulpit. What to do? I proceeded to preach a sermon, that, ironically, I wish I could forget. Forgetting things is a source of embarrassment for us all. What makes you cringe; what have you forgotten that you wish you would have remembered? An anniversary? A birthday? A promise? A vow? It gets worse as we age. The dulling of memory is a malady that strikes most people as we grow older.

*Three sisters ages 92, 94 and 96 live in a house together. One night the 96 year old draws a bath. She puts her foot in and pauses. She yells to the other sisters, “Was I getting in our out of the bath?” The 94 year old yells back, “I’ll come up and see.” She starts up the stairs and pauses. “Was I going up the stairs or down?” The 92 year old is sitting at the kitchen table, having tea, listening to her sisters. She shakes her head and says, “I sure hope I never get that forgetful.” For good measure she knocks on wood. She then yells, “I’ll come up and help you both out just as soon as I see who’s at the front door.”*

Along the way of life we forget a lot of what we know and have learned. I remember reading an article about memory. Researchers say the vast majority of what we read, what is taught us is forgotten within a matter of days. It’s a startling statistic, but one which, for the life of me, I cannot

remember.

Some memories haunt us. Though the Lord forgave his disciple Peter for disowning him three times, though the Lord reinstated Peter as a disciple, I'm sure that memory of swearing up and down, denying Jesus, I'm sure that memory pained Peter for the duration of his life.

Some memories haunt and hurt us. They lurk about in our hearts unwelcome. They just don't go away. Some of you are remembering people who are gone now – your parents, siblings, children . . . your dear spouse. Hopefully the memories of those people are gentle and bring you comfort, but some are painful. Some memories make us ache as they dredge up the tragedy, the abuse, the accident, the illness. Time usually makes those memories more bearable, but they're still not good, and never will be.

I'm wondering what your memories are. The Lord wrote the Law on our hearts, so our conscience and our memories accuse us. What are the things you remember that you hope and pray no one on this green earth ever discovers about you? People say things like, "Forget about it. It's history!" You try, but the pain remains, because sin so "easily entangles" us, says the writer of Hebrews (12:1). It doesn't let us go. Our memories have a strong, unrelenting grip on us, and they do us great damage.

Remember how the serpent manipulated Father Adam and Mother Eve? Remember how he tampered with their memory? "Did God really say you must not eat of the fruit of this tree?" And as he spoke, the Lord's words faded into the fog of forgetfulness. They covet and eat the forbidden fruit, and the whole creation falls. Yet God is gracious. He promises that the seed of the Woman will one day crush the head of the serpent. This is God's promise, the "First Gospel" and God never forgets it.

There are moments in the biblical record when God seems to want to forget his promises. I'm thinking of that time when Moses was long in coming back down from the mountain top, and people were getting restless. And of all things, they decide to fashion for themselves a golden calf.

Those sons of Adam and daughters of Eve completely forget who they are. They rise to drink and dance and celebrate their golden god. They drive the unforgetting God to the point when even he wants to forget his promises. He says to Moses, “I have had enough of these people! They are wicked. I cannot stomach them any longer. I will destroy them and will create a new family through your descendants (Ex. 32:9-10). But Moses pleads for them. “No, God! You brought them this far. Don’t forget your promises to them.”

Do you ever wonder if God becomes that frustrated with us? Do you ever wonder if God loses his patience with us, gets sick and tired of us? Do you ever wonder if the Lord wants to forget you? Yet God simply won’t do it! He will not forget. As a matter of will he keeps his promises. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). We are just as sinful as ancient Israel. But we would be missing the point entirely if we did not remind ourselves that God is just as faithful to us as he was to them.

One of the most comforting passages in all Scripture is this one in our Old Testament lesson, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” The Lord refers to this as a covenant, a promise. And if a promise is anything, it is something that will never be forgotten. The promise here is that he will forgive your wickedness and remember your sins no more. That’s grace. That’s mercy. That’s why we run to the Lord with our painful memories, and not from him.

But I’m thinking now of those prodigals, those who share our own DNA, and how they have turned their backs on him and walked away from him. In all their sophistication and wisdom and wealth, they get it into their heads they don’t need him anymore, and they forget. They forget whose they are.

Many of you pray for dear ones who appear to have forgotten. You lie in your bed in the middle of the night and you pray in the darkness that they will not forget their faith, their God, the rock from which they’ve been hewn, the

quarry from which they've been dug. You pray they remember, and you wonder what more you can say without driving them away.

Keep praying for his patience and mercy. Pray the Lord remembers his promises. It's not that he might otherwise forget them, but God loves it when people remind him of his promises and take them to heart. And take comfort in the fact that he will never forget your children, that he loves them more than you do and has not given up on him. That forward looking memory of you and your children drove him all the way to the cross.

That's why he was up there, after all; because he remembers. He remembers that promise made way back in the Garden. And he remembers how vulnerable we are to sin, death and the devil. Ps. 103, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." He remembers Adam and Eve and all their forgetful children. Jesus is pinned to a cross because he remembers.

He cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" In some inexplicable way, the union of the Trinity is torn, and Jesus is deprived of the love of the Father. He alone bears the sin of all humanity. He alone is abandoned of God. For a time, the Father forgets his beloved Son, and remembers you!

There was a thief crucified next to him. He turned to his Lord, and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom" (v. 42). That's enough for the crucified Jesus. He cannot resist the voice of the penitent. "Today, you will be with me in paradise!" The dying Jesus remembers why he has come. "When I am lifted up" he once promised, "I will draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:32). And so he begins with this penitent criminal, and gives him the gift of eternal life. He does that also for us. He cannot resist the voice of those who are penitent. He draws us to himself and gives us eternal life.

How can we be sure? Ask yourself. Did God ever

forget his people? Read about the terrible faith of those people, their wickedness, and then marvel that God stuck with them and ultimately brought them into the Promised Land. He was faithful. He never forgot the sinner. He chose instead to forget the sin. He never blotted their names from the book of life. He only blotted out their sins.

Isaiah wrote, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will never forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands” (Is. 49:15-16). I like that word engraved. Understand, this is not a pin prick. The same word is used to describe cutting a tomb out of the face of a mountain. When did this happen? When was your name engraved, hewn on the palm of God’s hand? Surely it happened when you were baptized. That’s when God placed your name on his heart forever, and in turn, put his name on you, an indelible mark. It means you are forgiven. It means you belong to him. It means you are his child now, and as such are simply unforgettable to him.

“This is the covenant I will make” declares the Lord. “I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.” All praise be to God. Amen.



