

“The Value of Remembering”

Mark 1:4-11

First Sunday after the Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord – January 8, 2012

A homily by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden -

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At the heart of Christian believing and belonging is the call to remembrance. Someone has said “that to be a Christian is to some extent an exercise of memory.” Reflecting, recollecting, remembering is valuable because it is not only essential to the health of a community or an individual, but it can also be a source of tremendous pleasure. I say this in spite of being aware of the many traps and dangers in memory. For example, we know that memory can be a place to hide from a reality that is too painful for us to endure or from a worldview that is too far removed from our past ...from our upbringing, our values, our heritage, our culture, or our ideals. We also know that memory can become a kind of cave for harboring hatred and grudges. And none of that is healthy.

In spite of its pitfalls memory is vital to life. Just ask any surviving prisoners of war and they will tell you that they kept their sanity because of memory ...recalling the names of school teachers, the names of classmates, street numbers, and a thousand significant and insignificant pieces of information that they had stored in their memories. They kept themselves alive by reaching into the chest of memory ...holding on to yesterday ...and by so doing, hoping that somehow it would guarantee a tomorrow.

Our memories should tie us to life that precedes our own birth and extends beyond our own death. They provide us with the means to recognize that our identities, the meaning of our lives, our futures, and our purposes entail being enrolled in a story that is *larger* than our own personal story. In the early church there were some Christians who used a significant term to describe what it was to be lost. The word they used was *amnesia*. To be lost in the world is to have forgotten who you are. I said earlier that to be a Christian is to some extent an exercise of memory ...to be in touch with who you are by way of remembering.

There is an incident in a novel entitled *Roots* by Alex Haley that illuminates this topic of remembering. Kunte Kinte is a slave and the central character at least for the early part of the story. Over the long years of Kunte Kinte’s humiliation the white masters did everything in

their power to rob him of his identity as a proud African. For months at a time he went without thinking of his past, of his country, of who he really is.

One night Kunte Kinte drives the master to a dance at a big plantation house. For hours he waits outside for the party to end to drive the master home. But while he waits, he hears a familiar sound. It is the sound of an African drum and it is being played by an African. Tracing the music to its source, Kunte Kinte finds an old African man who speaks his own language and understands his soul. Through the music and through the conversations that follow he recalls his own past, remembering things that were beginning to fade from his memory.

Later, while lying alone in his cabin, he wonders what is left of his original self. And before he cries himself to sleep he comes to the wonderful realization that through it all he has kept his dignity. This enslaved man still knew who he was, not Toby the slave, but Kunte Kinte, the proud son of Omoro. Thank God none of us here knows any such dehumanization of that man. But we do know how easy it is to forget whose we are and to whom we belong.

After his birth in Bethlehem there is another beginning in the life of Jesus, just as there is with each one of us who are his disciples. I am referring to that beginning that is marked by baptism, by our recognition and acceptance of God's relationship with us, and by our calling to do God's will and to minister to others as God directs. Mark records a voice from heaven that speaks directly to Jesus at his baptism, saying, "You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

What powerful words of affirmation these are! What words worth remembering! What a way to begin a new stage of one's life! What a good feeling to have before setting out on a new course! What a significant blessing to receive before undertaking any special work for God and with God! What a word to carry with one into the light of a new day!

In his baptism Jesus was clearly identified as the Son of God. Mark wants his readers to know what is going on with the Lord himself. By implication, Mark wants us to know that Jesus will be able to remember his baptism and to remember its importance for his own self-understanding. *You are my Beloved Son!* To Jesus this is a critical defining experience and these are powerful identity defining words. I cannot help but think that in the three years of ministry that followed his baptism Jesus must have derived great strength from the waters and the words that he experienced on that special day. When the crowds turned against him and his

friends betrayed him surely Jesus remembered his baptism, coveted that experience, and gave thanks for it. Surely he heard the divine voice again and again reassuring him: *You are my Beloved Son. That's what defines you. You are not defined by all this opposition; you are defined by your baptism.*

The biographer, Roland Bainton, told about Martin Luther's struggles to honor his conscience and to stand his ground as he protested the policies of his church. I quote: "Luther attached great importance to his baptism. When the devil assailed him, he would answer, 'I am baptized.'" (*Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, p. 287).

Perhaps today you have come here thinking that you have failed to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength ...that you have let God down. If so, then remember your baptism – a sign you received and a guarantee that God loves you in spite of what you have done or left undone. God loves you just the way you are.

Or perhaps you are lonely and wondering if *anyone* loves you. If so, remember your baptism: God loves you unconditionally. You count in God's eyes.

Perhaps you are wondering what life is all about. If so, remember your baptism: whatever else may not make sense, your baptism reminds you that one thing does make sense – you belong to God and you belong to the Body of Christ.

Perhaps you find yourself being tempted to do something very wrong ...against your own self, or against someone you love, or against someone you have started to despise. If so, remember your baptism: Jesus Christ has called you to live a new, transformed life and needs you to stand firm and say to the voice of temptation within, as Luther did, "I am baptized!"

Let us all remember that in baptism we have been marked as those who belong to God, and we have been freed from a life of sin and selfishness, of envy and hatred, of revenge and retaliation. We see ourselves, and can offer ourselves to God, as those brought forth from death to life ...as people liberated from sin and guilt through the death of Jesus Christ ...as those who have been stamped with Jesus' stamp and sealed with Jesus' seal in baptism.

Let us affirm the value of remembering our baptism today. Let us resolve not to ignore or diminish our worth as baptized children of God. Let us become more aware whose we are and whom we are called to serve. Let us derive great strength again from knowing that we are God's beloved children. And through acts of mercy, deeds of kindness, and words of love let us

bear witness to the world that we are committed to be disciples who are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.