

## Remember Me?

Psalm 77:1-14

In 1963 Andy Williams introduced a musical number that has become one of the top ten most popular Christmas songs today, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.” Personally, I have generally agreed that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year.

I have looked forward to this once-a-year celebration, when we act in ways that we don’t the rest of the year. When we create a world that to young children is surprising and better than they expected or imagined. When we plan things that are better than the routine—when we set our sights higher:

Look at the generosity of spirit that shines during the Christmas season; in the dramatic increase of charitable giving among people of all religions, and no religion. When else do we spend so much time with longstanding traditions and contemplate the mystery of God coming to earth?

What’s not to like about a time when we eagerly give gifts to each other, when widely scattered families make a great effort to gather for this season, and when complete strangers exchange holiday wishes, whether it be “Blessed Christmas, Merry Christmas, or Season’s Greetings?”

But my years as a pastor have made me keenly aware that circumstance and experience can produce a very different perspective on Christmas. There are times when the usual celebration of the season just is not possible. Where the contrast between other peoples’ joy and our own sense of loss is so overwhelming that is hard, if not impossible, to get into the Christmas spirit.

There has been one year in my time here at St. John’s that we did not offer a Blue Christmas service. For my part, I encouraged the break because, having lost both parents that year, I didn’t feel I was in a good position to offer comfort to others.

So if you are in a place right now where you have trouble singing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” or even listening to those who do, you have company, and it is certainly not a moral failing to feel that way.

We cannot in a single worship service change the circumstances, the experiences, or even the feelings and emotions that may have eroded the magic and muted the joy from the seasonal celebration of Jesus' birth.

What we can do tonight is to first of all acknowledge the loss and pain that is in this room and among those we may encounter in the coming weeks. We can walk with each other through the darkest valleys of life and see if we can find a pathway that will lead us through those valleys.

The person who wrote Psalm 77 was suffering the pain of deep loss. Persons in that kind of pain do not calmly analyze the situation from a big picture perspective. They do not engage in theological or philosophical arguments.

They want the pain to stop, or to at least be manageable, and until that happens it's hard to concentrate on anything else. The Psalmist acknowledges this when he writes, "I am so troubled that I cannot speak."

The foremost focus of the suffering is finding something or someone who can stop the pain. Again, if the pain is bad enough, we are not looking at a carefully considered, rational answer. We are willing to consider anything, even things that make little sense, if there is a chance it can ease the pain.

Back in the days when I worked at BioTechnical Resources, our company got involved in what was at the time a major health controversy. There were some stunning claims being made about the effectiveness of laetrile, a product derived from apricot pits. It was touted as a natural miracle cure for cancer. My particular lab was hired to do some independent chemical analysis of this material.

Although you can still buy the stuff, there has never been any clinical evidence that laetrile has any effect on cancer. The fact is, though, if you are desperate enough for relief, either for yourself or a loved one, you will grasp at any straw within reach.

The promises made about laetrile prompted many to do just that, but virtually all of them came away with nothing but shattered hopes and increased debt.

It was painful to watch this tragic situation, knowing how it was going to play out. There was never any rational expectation for laetrile to provide the cure. But you can't blame people in pain for taking a chance.

We see shattered expectations in religion. People have grown up believing that God is all-powerful, that God is good. God answers prayers. God protects God's children from all evil.

This leads desperate people to conclude that God could stop the pain, if God wanted. God could prevent loss, if God had cared to do that. But God has not done that—the pain is still there. The question is why? How could this happen under the watch of a supposedly loving God?

The Psalmist asks this question out of a sense of betrayal. In a desperate search for relief, he lashes out at God:

*"I think of God and I moan; I meditate and my spirit faints."*

*"Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever, and never again be favorable: Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up his compassion?"*

Such accusations may sound shocking or sacreligious, but the Bible lets those questions stand, because God understands the psychology of loss. God knows that people in great pain need to be able to express that pain. They need to be able to cry out, "I have lost something and it hurts."

If expressing that loss and pain means dumping a load of blame on God, then that is what needs to happen. God has enormous shoulders. God can carry the weight of all that pain and loss through the darkest valleys.

Whether or not that load of blame is fair is not a question that needs to be addressed. Not yet. Not while the pain is so blinding that it overpowers everything else.

Although our shoulders are not nearly as broad as God's, we are called to do the same thing. We are called to be there for each other. To carry whatever burden is required while the pain is blinding, whether it is fair or makes sense or not.

Whatever we do, we as Christians dare not skip this step. Sometimes the pain heals quickly, sometimes it takes many years. But however long it takes, it is not the final step.

I have known people whose lives have been so shattered by loss who become so angry at, or disappointed in, God that they want nothing more to do with religion.

That is a tragic place to end up. Somehow broken lives need to be restored to wholeness. In the Bible, that is a two-step process: It requires remembering, and it requires trust.

It can be heartbreaking to encounter the runaway suspicion and paranoia of an elderly person whose health is failing, who does not want to be in the hospital or in a care facility, and who becomes convinced her family is out to get her.

And you hear the child plead with them, “Remember me? I’m your daughter and you are my mother.

“I’m not out to get you. In your heart, you know that I love you and I have always loved you for all these years. No matter what it looks like to you now. I promise that no matter what happens, I will never stop loving and wanting to do what is best for you. Can you trust me?”

When one of our sons was four years old, he suffered an autoimmune hemolytic anemia attack that came within a hair’s breathe of killing him. During that ordeal, medical personnel had to subject him to a long series of painful procedures.

By far the worst moment of my entire life has been looking at his eyes as he pleaded with me to make them stop. Why would I who he had thought loved him unconditionally and would care for him always, just stand by and let this happen to him?

All I could cling to was the hope that our bond was strong enough so that when this was over, however it came out, he would remember that I was his dad, and not for one moment in his life would I ever stop loving him.

I imagine God often feels the same anguish I felt. When the Psalmist finishes his scream of pain, God responds to the accusation of betrayal or indifference or lack of compassion in a quiet, still voice that says, “Remember me? You are my child, and will always be my child, and not for one moment will never stop loving you.”

The wounded Psalmist then begins the path to restoration by remembering who God is. “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. You are the God who works wonders.”

Remembering causes him to have hope for the future. Remembering God’s faithfulness causes him to believe the promises.

I was fascinated to learn this week that the word *promise* does not appear in any of the Gospels. Not even once. I wondered about that, because Jesus makes a lot of promises in those Gospels.

My conclusion is this: What is the difference between me telling you, “I will pick you up at 5 o’clock,” and “I promise I will pick you up at 5 o’clock?” They both declare that I will pick you up at 5 o’clock. Saying, “I promise,” simply serves to remove any lingering doubts that this will actually happen.

Jesus makes many promises in the Gospels. But all his promises assume a level of trust. If Jesus says he will do it, he will do it. If Jesus says it will happen, it will happen. For those who remember who God is, who know God, no more needs to be said.

When he says, “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest,” that is exactly what will happen.

When he says “I came that you may have life and have it abundantly,” that’s a promise we can trust.

When he says, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age,” you can take that promise to the bank. There is not a chance in the world this won’t happen.

Remembering who God is leads us to trust in those promises. It is trust in those promises that uncovers the pathway that will lead us out of the darkest valleys, back into a land where joy, peace, goodwill to all, and glory to God in the highest are possible again.