

“Theological Amnesia”

Isaiah 40:21-31

February 5, 2012

This fall many of you achieved a great thing, you read the Bible in 90 days, or perhaps 90 plus a few more. The real point obviously is that you read the Bible cover to cover.

Now there was something good in that accomplishment and something bad about the accomplishment. It was good to read the whole Bible. And it was bad, to read the whole Bible!

Well, what I mean by that is for some, reading the whole Bible was a tough exercise in discovery. If Shawn Thomas' experience was anything like mine, he had more than a few conversations that started out, “I didn't know this was in the Bible,” and often continued with a variation of “This isn't the God I know.”

Now I very much appreciated the honesty of folks who expressed such thoughts. It represented a vulnerability, with integrity, to admit the wilderness experience of Israel conquering the land seemed strange, or new to you, or problematic in its violence.

So thank you for sharing. By reading the Bible and sharing your surprise you took great strides in avoiding of getting past one of the great struggles of the church today. Amnesia!

That is we have selective memory. We remember what we want to. If we are always self-critical we remember only the awful things we have done in life. If we think we are perfect, we remember

only the good things. (But we don't tell anyone that we know we're perfect.)

Bill Carl, president of Pittsburgh seminary puts this in a faith perspective when he notes that we struggle with “theological amnesia.” For Carl, this is the kind of problem that causes us to fall apart every time a crisis comes. It is that wave of abandonment we feel when we are downsized, forced into early retirement, or begin to see our marriage fall apart.

However such amnesia is most evident when everything is going well. Consider how easily we forget God when everything is hunk dory, smooth sailing ahead. We forget that God loves us and wants the best for us. We forget to praise God for the blessings we receive every day. Surely this was Israel's problem. The Deuteronomist and the prophets kept reminding Israel who God was and is. They repeatedly ask: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

The real problem, the larger issue, is that we as a church have forgotten who we are. There is a kind of theological identity crisis in the church today. I agree with Bill Carl when he says “we do not know who we are as Christians anymore. We do not remember what we believe or why we believe it.” And so we cannot talk with the world about our faith.

It is as if the same question Isaiah posed for the exiles, could be asked of us: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

There I was in Florida two weeks ago at a denomination sponsored evangelism event focused on Discipleship making in

the church. Several of the presenters and leaders are known for the outreach to people of their churches and the numbers of folks who are finding a spiritual home in their churches.

There were 60 of us from across the denomination attending. As we worked on how to improve discipleship-making in our churches, two hours away in Orlando, 2,100 people were gathered to consider how to form another church because they disagreed with actions of the duly elected and commissioned General Assembly and the year-long discernment process of the 171 presbyteries.

People have forgotten that God is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Friend. That the table set before us this morning welcomes all who would come to sit, and take and eat with friend and stranger, troubled neighbor and despised enemy, all together, around one table, one meal, one body.

We must remember that this is how God would have us create community, living, working, acting together across earthly, human defined lines that divide, and gathered in the God made circles of Christ's grace. God is a God of compassion and caring and is always there for us, in us and with us.

This is how we combat the stress and anxiety that is part and parcel of contemporary life. It seems to me, these things more than anything else, connect us with Israel in the exile and lead to our theological amnesia. Too many people are stressed out because of their lack of trust in God.

But you or they are not alone in that experience. For those who were troubled by God as found in the Old testament, think of Elijah hiding in a cave, scared to death of Jezebel. The word of the Lord comes to him in that still small voice saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

In other words, "Why are you stressed out? Get up and get moving again! Have you forgotten what I have done for you throughout your life? Have you forgotten that I was with you when you came face to face with the Baal prophets? Why do you keep forgetting me?"

Our text today, is similar. We tend to only remember its soaring conclusion. As important and crucial as it is, we must also grasp the whole text in context as a theological slap in the face that reminds us how God really does reign over nature, history and our lives. It is the singer Cher 20 years ago in the movie *Moonstruck* slapping Nick Cage and saying "Snap out of it!"

This text proclaims God has not forgotten you. In a year that may prove to be difficult for our denomination, God has not forgotten us. We worry when we don't trust God. Trust God more, and we will cure our worry problems.

It was a great blessing this week to celebrate and give thanks for the life of Bill Nelson. One of the things about Bill was that he always wanted to be on the go. He raised his four boys to go out and do things, to see the world, to connect with others. Bill was especially fond of nature and hiking. During the service I spoke about a photograph that I'm sure Chuck Barrett took at last

year's youth Sunday service. There was 92 year old Bill fist bumping with 16 year old Julia Gallini.

Connecting across the generations. Even more to the point was a family photo of Bill, in his 80's, (Scouts take note) hiking, up hill, with a full back pack. Out in the world, a man of faith continuing on.

And serving at the reception is Dot and Jack Barnes offering their 61st reception.

And when I'm anxious, I gather around this table, giving thanks that Christ has called me to it, and invited me to sit with these four and remember them and you and remember the words:

Even youths will faint and be weary,
And the young will fall exhausted;
But those who wait for the Lord shall
renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like
eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.