

Remember Before You Forget

By Kathy Ciarlariello

Looking back at a journal entry I had written in March, 2020, I read “Who would have thought? We are in the middle of a pandemic!” A list of “No’s” followed: no Church, no Bible study, no work, no school, maybe no Holy Week? Our family vacation was canceled, and I had written, “It’s OK to feel sad about that” next to this line.

The COVID-19 virus began picking up speed as we were entering the season of Lent. Soon, the world was plunged into an almost unrecognizable existence. We hadn’t known what it is to socially distance ourselves from loved ones, and we weren’t sure how long this would last. Streets were eerily empty. Zoom fatigue set in. Someone summed up these days as “The Lentiest Lent I’ve Ever Lented”.

One of the benefits of working from home during the pandemic was having more time to sit outside on our front porch. I became more aware of the natural surroundings in our neighborhood. I got to know the rhythm of the family of barred owls who live in our backyard, the noisy cry of a newly born hawk, the variety of birds who flitted about, sometimes dipping into our birdbath. I thought I heard a rooster crow. The rooster reminded me of Peter’s denial of Jesus (Matthew 26:75). How appropriate to have a rooster around during Lent.

One way my family remembers the Passover is by placing a wooden cross our boys made as children in our front yard and drape it in purple. I watched as birds landed on it and then fly away. A bird landed atop the cross and stayed a long while, chirping incessantly like he was proclaiming the Gospel. With the world shut down, time slowed down to a crawl, and I took advantage of it. In the margins of my journal I had written “more than sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29-31)

I journal to remember. My memory is short and my recollection of how things happen is oftentimes skewed. Journaling helps me turn back the pages of time and get a clearer perspective at how the Lord has worked in my life. Sometimes I’m surprised at how candidly I have spoken to God about my joys and sorrows. I’m glad I have some record of the journey. It’s so easy to forget.

God’s people share a long history of forgetfulness. The story of the Israelites’ flight from slavery in Egypt records the journey of a people who were to remember. Moses encountered the Lord through a burning bush. He wants to know how he should describe God to the people of Israel. God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” Exodus 3:14-15.

“I Am...Remember.”

The name God uses to describe Himself here is Yahweh, which is the holiest name for Himself in the Old Testament. It’s a wonderful name, inexhaustible in its meaning, and impossible to fully comprehend. The name indicates that He desires a personal relationship with His people. He is close by and accessible, and He offers help to His people. We can trust that He will uphold all of His covenantal promises, and that he will not forsake His people (Psalm 9:10). The name, “I Am” tells us that, no matter where we are in time and space, the Lord is there, relating to us in the now. “God’s personal name is so closely associated with His very being that He wants every generation to know and remember it.” (Tony Evans)

The Lord reveals to Moses how He would redeem the people from slavery, and the Passover would serve as a memorial to the Lord throughout the generations (Exodus 12:14-20). The Passover culminates in the Israelites miraculously crossing the Red Sea, singing a victory song, and heading into the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land. And the Lord was with them (Exodus 13:21-22).

We know how the story goes. It didn’t take long for their complaints to arise. They remembered the benefits of living in Egypt, but they seemed to have forgotten the Lord. Their rumbling tummies and parched mouths gave way to grumbling and wild accusations, even suspecting Moses had brought them out of Egypt to kill them (Exodus 16:3, Exodus 17:3). The Lord continued to provide, and the people continued to forget as they reached the border of the Promised Land. (Exodus 16:35). They knew the promises of God. They had seen Him act. But remembering Him, trusting Him, required a kind of waiting that seemed so...passive.

Remembering the Lord is especially difficult in the waiting place. During times of great uncertainty, like a pandemic, when we are called to an unknown time of waiting, our hearts are likely to wander, as we roam about searching for some peace in our lives. We get caught between adjusting ourselves to the temporary demands and restrictions a pandemic presents, while fearing the effects of a long haul in which we see no end. A battle arises between today’s dark realities and memories of yesterday. Our needs are immediate and unlimited. We have no script for the thing before us. We see our loved ones suffer. We want answers, and we don’t want to wait for them. We want to know that someone is in control and that we can quickly access that person. It’s difficult to meditate on God’s past provisions (Psalms 77:12, 106:7, 143:5) when all of our energy is spent on triaging the immediate needs of the day.

The Lord knew life would be a struggle for us, as it was for the Israelites. As Mt. Sinai shook with thunder and flashed with lightning, He presented Moses with the Ten Commandments, beginning with a call to remembrance and a warning. “I Am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:1-3) The Lord reminds the Israelites of what He has done for

them by bringing them out of slavery and warns them against idolatry. They can trust Him. Be careful not to go after idols. Remember.

Pandemics are major heart revealers. Just as the Israelites witnessed the shaking of Mt. Sinai, God shakes things up to wake us up (Hebrews 12:18-29). God sometimes allows the shaking of the world in hopes of exposing our hearts that for far too long have been imprisoned by our idols. We are brought face to face with what we really worship. Pandemics do not cause us to think, believe, or behave a certain way. They expose what we have trained our minds and hearts to think and believe already (Luke 6:45).

Looking back at my journal, I called the COVID-19 pandemic, “God’s Great Excavation Project.” The soil of all of our hearts was being dug up, turned over, and tested. God allowed this, and I wanted so much to know He would bring good from it. (Romans 8:28). A Journal entry reads, “What do You hope for humanity in this moment, Lord?” Heart excavations are painful. The pandemic was one of those rare times in our world when just about everyone’s heart hurt. Looking back at my journal I read, “Please do not let us waste our suffering.”

Sometimes the darkness of the world obscures the promises of God. In the darkness we reach for Him, seek Him, and sometimes hear nothing. We don’t want to wait (Psalm 27:14). We have a difficult time being still and knowing He is God (Psalm 46:10) and trusting Him to be our strength and shield (Psalm 28:7).

When you’re going under the waves of life, when you’re sinking, when you’re drowning, what good is a memory? Even praying can feel lonely. It’s hard to connect with scripture. Striving against the wind in the darkness of night on the sea of Galilee, arms sore from the constant rowing against rough waters, Jesus’ disciples were exhausted. For a while, and from a distance, Jesus watched them in their toil. (Mark 6:48)

Sometime during the fourth watch, the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea. They thought He was a ghost, and they cried out in fear for they were terrified (Mark 6:50). But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” In this passage, “It is I” literally translates to “I Am.” Jesus used the holiest name of God to disclose Himself to His disciples. The significance of Jesus’ self-disclosure would not have been lost on that group of young Jewish men.

Jesus wanted to reveal His divine glory to his disciples. He wanted to show them that He is the master of creation. That He is truly Lord of all. That He is holy. Walking on the water, Jesus reenacts the Lord passing by Moses in the cleft of a rock. Jesus’ passing by’ His disciples should be “read as an allusion to the Exodus theophany that Jesus’ walking on the water is a manifestation of divine glory.” (Richard Hays)

Jesus owns the very waters that threaten to pull us under. Only He who created the heavens has command over the sea (Job 9:8). He has authority over the still waters of an ordinary day, and He has authority over the raging waters of a pandemic. Only He can calm the roaring waves of our pandemic-stricken hearts.

What if we would remember before we were to forget that God is truly with us? That God is for us? (Romans 8:31)

Reflecting on my journal, I see a pattern in my life revealed. Sometimes I put myself through the same futile cycle. It goes something like this: I begin neglecting to wonder about and ponder the beauty of the Lord. I get busy and forget to give thanks. A problem arises, and my mind begins overthinking. I begin to harass my own mind instead of turning to God (Philippians 4:6). I know it's my full responsibility to take care of this problem, because I have forgotten the sovereignty of God. (Colossians 1:16-17). I begin feeling guilty for not seeing the problem coming, or taking care of it before it got so big, so I condemn myself (1 John 3:20). I feel sad, because I'm not perfect (Romans 3:23). Satan confirms all of my fears and perceptions (John 8:44). I desire comfort my way (James 1:14). I turn to my idols who have been calling out to me to return to them (1 Corinthians 10:7-12). I pick up where I last left off with my idols. I enjoy the temporary distraction my idols bring, but eventually I start feeling worse. I realize my idols still do not provide me with the peace and joy that only God can (John 14:27). The Holy Spirit helps me remember the goodness of the Lord (John 14:26). I break away from my idols (1 Corinthians 10:13) I turn to God. I tell Him of my weakness and how unequipped I am to manage this problem. I need wisdom (James 1:5). His grace and mercy begin to fill my soul (Ephesians 2:4-8). God's supernatural peace reassures my heart and mind that I am secure in Jesus (Philippians 4:7). I take a deep breath and remember that I forgot to remember...again. I give thanks to the Lord, and I worship Him (Psalm 9:1). A journal entry reminds me, "You cannot manufacture God's peace."

I began writing this essay as the world was coming out of an 18 month battle with Covid-19. We had just begun lifting our heads from under water when a second wave hit. This meant more death, more illness, further upheaval in our schools and businesses, deeper divisions in our personal lives. Social media discussions took the form of courtroom proceedings, as accusations flew back and forth as to the best ways to end the pandemic. Many of us were way too eager to play the part of Prosecuting Attorney. As a friend of mine likes to say, "Satan loves to show out in a crowd."

My mind was tired as we rowed into the second wave of the pandemic. I needed to know that we had not been left alone (John 14:18). I wanted Jesus to step into the boat, and I wanted the winds to cease (Mark 6:51). When everything is working against us to forget His faithfulness, God's Holy Spirit helps us to remember. (John 14:26). I opened my journal and recounted the many times Jesus had "stepped into the boat" with me. Through health crises, relationship upheaval, financial problems, addictions, deaths, betrayal, and so much more, God's Spirit has always been faithful in reminding me I am not alone (John 14:15-20; Matthew

28:20b). Covered with the blood of the Lamb, I remember that I have the help I need as I cross the raging waters of this life to reach The Better Promised Land (Revelation 21:2).

The summer right before the COVID-19 pandemic brought unique challenges to my life. I wrote a lot that summer, even adding some poetry to the mix. Looking back at a pre-pandemic journal entry, I read a lyrical poem from “A Summer of Thoughts, 2019”. I wonder if the Lord was helping me to remember before I forgot:

O Jesus, He who soothes my soul

I heard a voice call out, call out, “Come and follow me.” So I lit my lamp and found the path and waded out to sea.

Refrain: The waves came up and over me, in the undertow, ‘twas Jesus, He who rescued me, He who soothed my soul.

The serpent hissed, coiled back and whispered things of a charm-filled life,

“What is it child, you want the most? It comes with little price.”

My lantern flickered at the tossing of the tempestuous sea,

The waters threatened to overwhelm, to drown the mystery.

Refrain

The practiced tongue of the evil one wagged and protested all the more,

“Dear one, on a lonesome run, your life means surely more.”

Crashing billows, depth of dark, pushed me further still.

Death nearby, light was fleeing,

Deep inside His will.

Refrain

Morning came and I lay upon the rocky shore,

Remnants of a night of drain lay gathered on the floor.

The serpent’s back was all I saw of the temptor’s parting trail.

But oh, my lantern burning bright proved Jesus’ love prevailed.

I’m glad I wrote this poem down so that I may reflect on how The Lord cared for me in those days. It’s so easy to forget.

Last spring I learned we have a rooster in our neighborhood. Placing the wooden cross in our front yard during Lent and draping it in purple cloth I watched the birds land on it. It's a good place to land. Taking the cross down after the season has ended, I hear the rooster crow. And I remember.