

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

So, let me ask you a personal question: Do you spend a lot of time remembering unfortunate things from your past? Do your past mistakes and misbehavior randomly pop into your thoughts, things which have remained unresolved for years, things you are ashamed about? Things which you wouldn't share with anyone, and things which you wish you didn't even have to share with yourself? Memories which make you cringe with embarrassment and humiliation? Memories which leave you asking yourself "How could I have done that? How could I have been so stupid? What was I *thinking*?" Do you often wish you could come down with selective amnesia, forgetting those experiences which still sting so badly? In other words, do you spend a significant amount of your precious time somehow longing and hoping for a better past?

If this sounds like something you experience regularly, then I can certainly empathize. These awful memories not only trouble me, but frankly waste a lot of my otherwise productive time and energy. For example, seventy years ago, when I was a toddler and my father was away at piano tuning school in Harrisburg for six months, my mother was desperate to land a teaching job. Money was tight, and she was substitute teaching at our hometown school, hoping to meet the right people and make a good impression. So, one day after school she hosted a tea for her new teacher-friends. Among other things, she wanted to show off her precocious little boy, about whom she was so proud. My grandmother got me up from my nap and brought me downstairs and placed me with some of my toys on the floor in front of the coffee table where these adult women were gathered, and I proceeded to throw a tantrum. I was, as I recall, completely off the rails, unmanageable and embarrassing to my dear mother. I remember she wept afterward as my grandmother tried to console her disappointed daughter. I didn't know why I had done it. I just couldn't help my sinful self. We never spoke of it afterward, and I never apologized. And now it's too late. To this day, I just wish it would never pop into my head. But it does. It haunts me.

Does this kind of memory plague you, too? Well, let me suggest an alternative, one with which I'm sure some of you are familiar and which might yet be a new idea for others. It's usually called "Spiritual Autobiography." It won't eliminate those unpleasant visits from unwelcome memories, but it helps put them in their place. Instead of being captive to their random appearances, spiritual autobiography helps us be deliberate about our recollections, and connect them to God. It becomes a fruitful task, for, we believe, God has loved us since our conception, and has lovingly accompanied us throughout our life's journey. Can we find evidence of that presence in the things we recall about our personal lives, even in the unpleasant ones? Well, let's see. The plan is to write a personal letter to yourself, or to God, specifically noting those times and events when God's Holy Spirit had an influence in your heart and mind, the thin places of your personal history. The minute you assume this perspective, I'll bet the evidence will just come flowing out, in a stream of remarkable and mysterious ways. It may even make you want to stop and say: For what has been, thanks be to God; for what is, thanks be to God; and for what will be, thanks be to God!

Think about it: In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul tells about his life, and how his credentials are so tied to religion. He recalls that he grew up as a faithful Hebrew, and became part of the special elite of Pharisees, and how that put him into a position of honor among his peers, and how proud he was of himself and his status. Why, he even became one of those who, after the Crucifixion, reliably rounded up followers of this Jesus fellow for persecution. Don't you think that must have haunted him later! He writes that in those days he claimed to be a blameless follower of the Laws of Moses, including the Ten Commandments we heard this morning. This wasn't just a part of his credentials, it was part of who he was in his relationship with God. He doesn't deny or discount it, but he does write down the insight that his pride about it was shameful. He reckons it as a loss. He writes that it was rubbish. Actually, the Greek word translated here means

“excrement”; his proud participation in the misuse of the Commandments following the Crucifixion had made him complicit in all that excrement.

Paul must have had a really complicated spiritual autobiography. God had so much dramatic influence in his life. Recall that on that road to Damascus he had a blinding vision and heard the voice of Christ calling to him and asking him that piercing question, ‘why do you persecute me?!’ And afterward, how the twists and turns of his life, influenced, he admits, by the Holy Spirit, brought him so many life-changing challenges and opportunities. In this letter to his flock in Philippi, he calls it a striving for the prize, sustained and encouraged by the Spirit. What Paul has realized in reflecting on his past is that what is gained comes from God’s presence in his life. He doesn’t presume to boast about his achievements, nor does he wallow in shame about his mistakes, he boasts instead about the power of God’s influence, about God’s guidance, about God’s amazing grace. He finds himself living in Christ, in the love of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, yet is so clearly evident in every experience.

So, my suggestion is to work on your own spiritual autobiography, and see where it leads you. Consider the opportunities God has created for you over the years, the blessings with which you have been showered since you were a toddler yourself, the times you have felt God’s comfort in sorrow and friendship in joy. Once you begin writing things down, it may overwhelm you. Best, then, to be a little systematic about it, and there are recommendations for just how you can do that. It seems helpful, for example, to divide your life more or less into 15-year segments. I don’t know why, but that really seems to work. Think about how you may have experienced things differently during each of those segments, and how God’s presence seemed tailor-made for those times. Sometimes using a prop might help you remember things, for example what books have influenced your spiritual adventure, making a list which stretches back to childhood. Or, what people have been spiritually influential for you, family members, teachers, pastors, close friends or even strangers. Perhaps you have had watershed events which changed your heart or your mind; was God evident there and then? Look for love, and you’ll no doubt find God there. Write it down, and take heart.

But the really fun thing about writing your spiritual autobiography is that it is storytelling! Everyone likes to tell a story, and reflecting on your life in this way makes for a great story. But this isn’t just a story about you and your own adventures, rather it’s the story of you and God together, in good times and in bad. When the two of you have enjoyed yourselves and maybe even when you’ve argued, but always together as companions and best friends. When we gathered in John and Carol’s garden a couple of weeks ago, I alluded to the idea that we might insert ourselves into God’s unfolding story, and today we shared that story with the Hebrews as they stood before the smoking mountain hearing Moses loudly proclaim those familiar commandments. And we stood with the crowd in the Temple as Jesus taught so powerfully in parables, while out of the corner of our eyes we glimpsed the nervous Temple authorities as they wondered what to do next. Writing our own story, when it includes testimony about God, can incorporate us into the greater story, the exciting Biblical witness, of God’s loving intentions for creation. We can recognize Christ in us, as we are in Christ.

And when you’re writing, don’t neglect to notice what is spiritually happening to you as you do. Including God in your autobiographical narrative, and letting yourself be included in God’s story, brings hope for the future. If there is such evidence that you haven’t been alone on your journey, why would you doubt that God’s presence will elude or abandon you in times to come? If Christ has been your trustworthy companion, guide, and friend all these years, why wouldn’t Christ be a reliable light to your path as you go forward? After all, your spiritual autobiography is as much a love-letter from Christ as it is to Christ, isn’t it? And with each push of the pencil or stroke of a key, you’re likely to find yourself saying, ‘For what has been, thanks be to God; for what is right now, thanks be to God; and for what will be, thanks be to God!’ Amen.

Influences, thin places, important people and events, books, trips

For what has been....