

**May 10, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [John 14:8–12, 26](#)**

**TITLE: What We Remember**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

When Philip asked his question of Jesus, he likely didn't mean it quite like it sounded. According to John's gospel, Philip was one of Jesus' first disciples—a faithful follower; a good man with a good heart. John 14 describes how they were at the Last Supper and Jesus had been speaking about leaving them. It wasn't what they wanted to hear. So Philip tried to bargain with Jesus: *Lord, show us God and we will be satisfied.* Jesus replied with a touch of sadness in his voice, "Philip, have I been with you all this time and still you do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen God." It is about the most direct answer Jesus ever gave about who he was and how in him, God has truly come near to us.

Think back to the first book in the bible. In the beginning God was God—part of the mystery before time and before the universe itself, distant and distinct. But then God chose to call forth life, to create something that wasn't God—and what God made, God called good. This Creator God was engaged in life, shaping and sustaining it. But the human creatures of the world were often violent, unkind, and indifferent to God's will. So God drew closer—acting in the life of the Hebrew child Moses, rescuing people from slavery, and then providing words of wisdom, commandments, at a particular spot—on Mount Sinai. God remained relatively close by—present in the tent, the tabernacle the Hebrew people carried on their wanderings. Later God was present in the temple they built in the City of David. Not confined there, but accessible there. Staying near so we might ever remember we are not alone.

But that was not close enough. Still we wandered away; we chose violence and racism and war, until in the fullness of time God drew even closer—in the Hebrew child Jesus. Jesus grew in wisdom and glory, He healed and taught. He called Philip and welcomed Mary Magdalene. He incarnated God for a people hungry to see God. Yet as Philip's question revealed, somehow it still wasn't enough. Philip asked for something more, to which Jesus said, "The words I've spoken were not just my own, but God's. The things I've done were not my own acts, but works of God. Can you believe that?"

Jesus isn't angry at this point. Because wrapped up in his answer to Philip are words of reassurance. Jesus told them that even though he is leaving them, they will do even greater works than what he himself did. And then he offered the most powerful assurance of all when he said, "The Holy Spirit will remind you of all that I have said to you." In effect Jesus said, "With God's help, by God's grace, you will remember what you need to know. So don't be afraid."

Is it comforting to be told "you will remember"? Yes and No. Yes, because there are so many things that bring us joy when we remember them: lullabies and the feel of a sleeping child in our arms; seeing loved ones across a table at a big meal; sunlight

shining on us as we work in a garden, walk in a park, awaken and look out a window and give thanks that God has brought us safe into a new day.

But there are also things we have to work at remembering. Back in May 1992 during the Yugoslavian civil war, a mortar shell exploded in Sarajevo killing 22 people who were waiting in line for food. The next day at exactly the same time as the explosion, a cellist from the symphony came to the spot where the shell had exploded, set up his chair and instrument, and played Albinoni's "Adagio." He returned each day for 22 days to play the same piece, once for each of the 22 people who had died. It was a sacramental act of remembrance, done so that the dead might not be forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

We are quick to forget how fragile human beings actually are. In the early 1800s, one in five Americans died of tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup> Viruses like yellow fever and typhoid caused thousands of deaths—so our coronavirus epidemic today is not unheard of. Polio diagnoses still struck terror into hearts well into the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. We forget these things. Ida B. Wells was recently honored with a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, but we forget that she wrote most powerfully on the racist scourge of lynching in America. And we still have much to learn on this topic, given the tragic shooting in Georgia of Ahmaud Arbery, whose act of jogging was enough to scare white men into deeming him a threat and gunning him down. Lord, have mercy.

To be told "you will remember" can be a mixed blessing, but it is an important blessing. Only by remembering the past can we move away from our failures and take comfort in our successes. We also remember how God was with us in times past and has promised to be with us through all our todays and tomorrows. When Jesus answered Philip's question, he implored Philip to remember all the things he had said and done because it was in that way God had been revealed. We long for God to be present with us here on earth. Well, in Jesus Christ, God's divine presence in our midst was real. We long to hear wisdom that is timeless—in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we hear what is true and life-sustaining. In Jesus' acts of healing, we see God's own spirit of compassion and mercy. And in Jesus' death and resurrection, we see God's love that is stronger than everything we might fear. In Christ God is present: God's word is spoken; God's healing grace is offered; God's love is seen and remembered now and until the end of time.

But sometimes for us, all that it is not enough. Like Thomas we want to literally touch Jesus. Like Philip we want to literally see and know God is right beside us. To those requests, Jesus offered a calming, nuanced answer. He reassured them that they will not be left alone. He encouraged them by saying "You will do even greater works than me." And he informed them that the Holy Spirit will teach and remind them of everything they need to know.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel Lila, the old minister and his wife were in bed burrowed under the covers trying to stay warm when they happened to talk about prayer. Their conversation went something like this: If in a moment of quiet you hope that tomorrow is a little different from today, that's a prayer. *Family* is a prayer. *Child* is a prayer. *Health*

is a prayer. To picture these things is to imagine them in the best possible way – and that imagining is always a prayer. But then the old pastor said this: *The worst things just come like the weather. You do what you can. [But] the best things that happen I'd never have thought to pray for. [Not] in a million years.*<sup>3</sup>

That's God's gift to us – the ability to remember the best things that happen and to recognize that they were things we'd likely never think to pray for—things we'd hardly imagined possible—yet things God gifted to us anyway. What are the best things you remember? I mentioned a few things earlier that came to my mind: lullabies that are finally successful and that moment before you put the sleeping child down in the crib; seeing loved ones across a table where something unspoken yet real becomes tangible in our connection over broken bread; music that is so much more than a collection of notes; beauty in creation, whistling swans, blue skies that are so much more than just “nature”; taking a breath and being alive, realizing how life is a gift unearned and a gift to be treasured.

The apostle Paul was almost too efficient when he closed out his letter to the Philippians and rattled off a “to do” list of things we should remember: *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable and worthy of praise, think of these things.* (Phil 4:8) Yes, that is important. But I like the old preacher's comment even better. *The best things that happen I'd have never thought to pray for—not in a million years.* That is the answer Jesus gave to Philip and still gives to us today. That is what God brings to our remembrance. New beginnings. Easter resurrection. Abiding faith, hope, love, these three. The best things—more than we could hope for or imagine.

In Christ Jesus, we have seen God—at least all we need to see. More importantly, in Christ through the Spirit of God's grace, God brings to mind what we need to remember—and in remembering we can do great things. Alleluia. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Christiansen, *Theology Today*, January 1995, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Grinspan, “How to Run During a Pandemic,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2020, p. SR 6.

<sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Lila*, 2014, p 237.