

## The Future Is Not What It Used to Be

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This week I spent time on Facebook reminiscing with some cousins; shared some memories—the way things used to be—the way we used to be. There's something comfortable about reminiscing—warm and soft—like the shawl my grandmother hand-knitted for my grandfather after he had his first stroke; like the faded brown slippers he wore—lined with rabbit fur.

They lived on a farm west of Ranger, Texas, and many memories of my grandfather are associated with our visits to that drafty old farm house where, in the dead of winter, the only heat came from a wood-burning cook stove in the kitchen (where it was always too hot) and a big rock fireplace in the parlor (where it was always cold.) Standing by the fireplace you'd be almost ablaze on the side facing the fire; cold on the other. I guess, on average, you were just about right.

I remember my grandfather, sitting in the evening in the big wood rocker in front of that fireplace. My sister and I loved to listen to his stories about his family coming in a covered wagon from Louisiana to west Texas; stories about his days as a cowpuncher along the old Chisholm Trail.

I remember seeing him sitting "tall in the saddle," going out late in the afternoon to bring up the cow to be milked. But in later memories his body was tired. Still, when he told those stories his face came alive. His dim eyes danced, and the words skipped across his tongue like a schoolgirl playing hop-scotch.

All too soon it'd be time to go to bed. We'd put on flannel pajamas and back up to the fireplace until we were almost ablaze on one side, and then try to run and jump into bed before we cooled down. Grandmother would put a brick on the hearth after supper and let it heat. At bedtime she'd wrap it in a towel and put it under the covers at our feet. And there were so many quilts piled on the bed that our toes got sore holding them up. But it never worked; we were always cold.

What warmed us were Granddaddy's stories—his reminiscences of days gone by. But Granddaddy never—**ever**—said those days were better than today.

Oh, he could have. There would have been plenty of evidence. In fact, many in his generation *did* sing that song. Theirs was a generation that was still very young when the 20<sup>th</sup> century began. It was time of extreme optimism: high expectations. The age of science was in full swing, the Industrial Revolution was producing great technological advances, medical science was making great strides against disease. Some theologians were teaching that "The Kingdom of God" was emerging in America. It was a time when inevitable progress was simply assumed.

Then in August, 1914, all that came to a halt. Germany declared war on Russia. After the war came the Great Depression (My grandfather lost his farm during the depression and spent the rest of his life farming for other people.)

Then came World War II; and the constant fear of "the bomb." Korea was heating up, there were "beatniks" on the street, and Joe McCarthy was looking for a communist under every bed. And then, for my grandfather, a debilitating stroke...

If anybody had the right, my grandfather had the right to sing, "The Old Gray Mare, She Ain't What She Used to Be."

Memory has a way of enhancing the past. The good gets better—the fish get bigger... Many churches today remember full parking lots and full sanctuaries—back in the 1940's and 50's; full choir lofts, huge youth groups, extra chairs in the aisles on Easter, Sunday School attendance exceeded today's worship attendance... They sing the song my grandfather's generation sang—but which, thankfully, I never heard him sing: "The Old Gray Mare, She Ain't What She Used to Be."

I remember getting lost in the county courthouse in Snyder, Texas, when my Mom went there to take her driver's license test: huge building—endless corridors running in every direction. I was, oh, nine or ten, and it was frightening.

Then we moved away from there. After high school I was traveling with my college band to a football game in Lubbock, and we drove through Snyder—right by the old courthouse where I once feared I would spend eternity. It had shrunk, considerably. It certainly was not the building I remembered.

Memory has a way of enhancing the past. Clichés and self-help books everywhere counsel us to live neither in the past nor in the future: "the present is all we have." And yet, a person or a people without roots is a person or a people without identity. Mental Health professionals spend increasing time treating people who either are obsessing over their past or struggling to forget it.

And adage is still true: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>1</sup> One of my favorite responses to the past is from Rick Warren: "We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it."<sup>2</sup>

All four Lectionary texts today are about memory: not nostalgic, sentimental reminiscing, but a specific way of defining the present, and inviting the people of God into a future given by the God who is being remembered. Listen to...

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b (NRSV)

<sup>0</sup> Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.

<sup>2</sup> Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.

<sup>3</sup> Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

<sup>4</sup> Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.

<sup>5</sup> Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,

<sup>6</sup> O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

<sup>7</sup> He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense*. (Scribner's, 1905) p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?* (Zondervan, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,  
<sup>9</sup> the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,  
<sup>10</sup> which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant,  
<sup>11</sup> saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance."  
45<sup>b</sup> Praise the Lord!

The psalm opens with exuberant thanksgiving and praise and calls the people to remember God's works and deeds, which form the foundation of their identity. These acts of praise are crucial to a faith community suffering from systemic amnesia—a community which has forgotten its past and the God whose presence and action in that past has formed their present and given them their identity.

A community that is indifferent to the manifestations of God's presence in its past probably will misunderstand its present. The present is meaningless, and the people are aimlessly adrift without remembering and reconnecting to that past.

These verses remind Israel that when they have forgotten God's presence and activity within and among them, they've been lured into an imagined self-reliance, which always has ended in destruction. And so, these lyrical verses not only are a call to remember, but are, themselves, an act of remembering.

And then, in verse 7, the focus shifts from remembering God to reminding the people who *they* are: Partners with God. Walter Brueggemann describes that partnership as being "called into covenant with God, whose intention it is that none shall live as displaced persons, none shall live without life supports and social guarantees, none shall live without belonging in full membership."<sup>3</sup>

C.S. Lewis wrote: "For (God) seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye."<sup>4</sup>

I never tired of boyhood visits to my grandfather's house. But it was never because of the house, itself—drafty, unpainted old dust bowl house. What made those trips so memorable, and what made me always want to go back, was the memory of the ones who lived there.

Remembering God's past deeds urges God's people in the present to work with God toward God's future, a future in which all peoples of the earth will know abundant life.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p 420.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Harvest Books), pp 8-9.