

“Remembering and Responding”

During our Lenten worship services, I will be preaching from the Old Testament Lessons, which include a review of Israel’s ancient history. We will focus on the covenant with Abraham; the first Passover in the land in the time of Joshua; and two glimpses at the Babylonian exile. Re-reading these Old Testament stories remind us of how mighty and good God was to the Children of Israel. Those stories were kept alive, because they were told and retold countless times before they were ever recorded in print. While the events occurred thousands of years ago, the lessons still apply to us today. In retelling the stories, the listeners were encouraged to remember and respond.

The season of Lent provides time for us to take inventory; to lay our lives before God and see how we need to change. Taking inventory involves remembering. When we consider how God has created us, called us by name, and directed our paths, we also realize that *remembering* has its own issues. History gets told by the winners, so when we take inventory, we can retell our stories as we want to remember them, recalling them through our human filters, or we can look beyond the obvious to see the hand of God.

We know that God is at work in *all* things, which is a different idea from God *causing* all things. I don’t believe that God caused the 9-11 attacks no more than I think that God orchestrated the Holocaust, but I do believe that God *can* work through tragedy and circumstances, because God is *bigger* than any tragedy and circumstance. During Lent, we take time to take inventory, to remember. While we may acknowledge God’s presence with us in every situation, we also know that God’s promises are true. Emmanuel, God with us, continues to be a fail-safe promise on which we can depend. When we remember how God has blessed us, provided for us, and sustained us, we also are to respond. During Lent, the response for many of us will include giving up something in hopes of recognizing the sacrifice that Jesus made for us. Another response during Lent is to give up something so that an individual can place more time and emphasis on their personal relationship with God. Remembering and responding. Scripture is replete with this ebb and flow.

Today’s Old Testament Lesson offers a short history lesson detailing the story of the Children of Israel. Our text records Moses offering a speech before his death to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the land promised to them, a wait which many would have declared was long overdue. They had wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and as they faced a bright future, Moses gave them some final instructions which included remembering and responding. They were implored to bring some of their firstfruits to the worship place. When they harvested their first crop in their new land, they were to *remember* how God had delivered them, and then they were to *respond* with the firstfruits of the land.

God has also blessed us bountifully. When we review our mental calendars, we find answered prayers and God’s sustaining presence. We never have known a day when God wasn’t with us. While God rained manna from heaven to the Children of Israel, God did not *physically* place it in their mouths; they still had to gather it and feed themselves. They had to depend upon God, but God also expected them to keep following, even when they wondered how and why.

When we look backward, we see where God walked with us through death’s dark valleys; where God led us to that new opportunity; where God opened the door when we thought there was no avenue. The Children of Israel were miraculously delivered from Egyptian bondage. While the wandering Aramean named Jacob had settled in Egypt, he had been led there because of God’s providence. Much later, after Jacob’s son Joseph had died, the climate changed, and the new Pharaoh became threatened, because the Israelites greatly increased in numbers. Slavery to the greater powers became the order of the day, and after much perseverance and prayers on behalf of the people, God

delivered an escape. God then removed obstacle after obstacle in providing beyond their wildest dreams; all God asked was that they believe, that they have faith when they couldn't see the outcome. Crossing seabeds on dry land, being led by pillars of fire and clouds, wearing sandals that did not wear out, and receiving provision of daily food allowed their story to continue. Now, on the precipice of their entry into the promised land, they were encouraged to *remember* and then *respond* with the first-fruits of the land. They had been delivered; with thanksgiving, they were to bring an offering of gratitude to God.

Canceling two consecutive Sundays is certainly the exception here at Hampton Baptist. No one with whom I have inquired remembers this anomaly; perhaps the last time that HBC did not worship on two successive Sundays was during the Civil War, when all of Hampton was burned and the church dispersed for a period of time. After the War, our forebears of Hampton Baptist sought God's direction, and God delivered, yet the people had to sacrifice as well. Our records indicate that Hampton Baptist only had 120 members in 1866. Seventeen years later, this grand, beautiful sanctuary, in which we continue to worship, was constructed. As this community regained strength during a period called Reconstruction, members of Hampton Baptist continued to remember and respond. For some, the historical period called the Civil War and Reconstruction could have been deemed their own wilderness wandering. But they continued to remember and respond until they entered the promised land of a new sanctuary.

Thankfully, all of us survived the wintry storms of 2010; we had food to eat, roofs above our heads, and heat. Now that we've returned for worship, we are also to remember how good God has been to *us*, and while remembering makes us *feel* good, we are also to respond.

Responses take many forms, and one way to respond comes through our financial stewardship. Even when we don't gather for worship, the work of the church continues. Sunday School literature comes with pricetags; missionary support does not occur only when we worship; maintenance of our facility continues; ministries for children and youth cost money. While these expenses are real and not having an offering plate passed for two Sundays affects the cash-flow for the operations of our church, financial contributions should not be *tied* to the budget. The primary reason that a Christian tithes or gives to the church should *not* be to pay expenses, but *instead* are to be linked to our commitment and dedication to Almighty God. If we only give to a budget, then we have forgotten *why* we give. Our financial stewardship also becomes connected to remembering and responding: recalling how much God loves us and then offering a response.

God delivered the Children of Israel; God directed Hampton Baptist during the most troublesome time in our storied history; God will continue to provide for us today.

How has God delivered you? Perhaps God has protected you from harm, shielded your family from ruin, offered a way out of hardship. While you have countless stories which you could tell, allow me to tell one of mine about remembering and responding.

For seven years, I was the Associate Pastor/ Students at the First Baptist Church of Lithonia, Georgia. My primary responsibilities were ministry to youth and college students. A ninth grade boy was invited to our Wednesday night Youth Bible Study by a tenth grade girl. The guest entered the Youth Room wearing all black, combat boots, some chains, and leather jewelry. He was abrasive, opinionated, and angry. His name was John Chamblee. As I asked him his story, I learned that he was been raised by loving parents who were successful in their respective careers. John was very bright. He continued to come to our Bible Study where he found acceptance. Slowly, he dropped his guard, and his anger began to dissipate. He offered sermons on Youth Sunday for his sophomore, junior, and senior years.

When our daughter Ally was born, we had little extra discretionary income; Jennifer had been seeing clients for a year in a private practice, and my financial package as a staff member in a church

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which struggled to meet its budget was modest. Our Baptist insurance paid \$3,000 to deliver a baby, which I thought was for the doctor and the hospital stay. When Ally was six-weeks-old and we had received bills totaling almost \$6,000, I learned that our insurance topped at \$3,000. I sought a payment plan with the hospital to pay the balance over time, and they denied my request; they needed payment in full very soon. We didn't have the money; we wondered how we would pay it.

The next Sunday after church, which was Graduate Recognition Sunday, John's mother approached me in the parking lot. She pulled me aside, gave me an envelope and said, "As a travel agent, I occasionally land some big groups. You have been a remarkable influence on my son, and we are so grateful. Please accept this token of our appreciation for the impact you've had on his life." The check was enough to cover our outstanding medical bills, and that family was unaware that we needed it. Those parents remembered and responded.

John later received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Arizona and is presently employed by the University of Georgia. When he graduated from high school, he gave me his combat boots; they hang in my office closet beside my robe as a weekly reminder that there is no such person as a lost cause. I see those boots every Sunday as I prepare for worship; they serve as a personal reminder that I should continue to remember and respond. God has been very good to me.

As I mentioned, you have your own stories to tell. Most of us have been blessed with the ability to remember. The Children of Israel were encouraged to acknowledge the goodness of God with a response of firstfruits. During Lent, you are invited to take dedicated opportunities to remember how and when God has delivered you, guided you, provided for you, answered your prayers, and given you unspeakable joy. Realizing that God remains faithful, we are also invited to examine how we have responded to that goodness and grace. Especially during Lent, we are to respond with contriteness of heart knowing that God still loves us even when we don't deserve it. As you remember the grace and mercy of God today, what will your response be?