

Fail to No End
Sermon, March 13, 2016
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4-14

This past Friday afternoon, the Rev. Stuart A. Kenworthy, Vicar of the Washington National Cathedral, began his funeral homily with these words: *"Today we are exactly where we ought to be, standing with this family and one another before the mystery of life and death, saying our prayers and farewell to Nancy Davis Reagan. The great twentieth century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was once asked, 'What is the most important thing a religious person can do?' His answer was given in one word: 'Remember.' That is precisely what we do this day. This is what we do as religious people every time we gather ... we hear again and again the stories of encountering God ancient and cherished: stories that point to God as ineffable mystery, yet still revealed to our fragile and mortal humanity. We remember God's saving love for the human race and family. And in that act of remembering, the God of life and the Giver of every good gift is present to us."*

What is the most important thing a religious person can do? Remember. And in that act of remembering, the God of life and the Giver of every good gift is present to us.

Remember. I've pointed this out before (*and many of you may remember*), but this is the most frequent command given in the entire Bible. Someone counted there are actually some two hundred and seventy times in the Bible we are told to "remember" ... again, making "Remember!" the most frequent command. By the way, does anyone *remember* the second most frequent command given in the Bible? No, it is not "Love." The second most frequent commandment is "Fear not" (*or "Don't be afraid."*) REMEMBER, AND FEAR NOT. Remember what God has done, remember what God can do, remember what He has promised, remember how He has delivered. Remember, remember, remember! And fear not!

Yet, in today's Old Testament lesson, God seems to contradict Rabbi Heschel and this most frequent biblical imperative by saying through the prophet Isaiah, *"Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am about to do a new thing!"* And in the New Testament reading, Paul certainly seems to echo the same sentiment by saying, *"Forgetting what is behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal ..."* So today's lectionary texts have Paul and the Lord God sounding like a couple of native New Englanders saying "Fahgeddabowtit!"

Forget the former things? You just want us to fahgeddabowtit? Isn't that problematic? Aren't too many people these days fahgeddingabowtit when it comes to religious things, to our religious heritage, to our religious roots and ethics and morals? Israel's life, the church's life, our lives, are all built on a foundation of remembrance. As the good vicar said, isn't it in the act of remembering that the God of life is with us? Don't we read two hundred and seventy times in Scripture, *"Remember Remember Remember Remember Remember Remember..."*? Remember Egypt, Moses, the Red Sea, manna, water from the rock, covenant at Sinai, the Promised Land ... and now God is saying forget all of this? Well, in a way, yes, He is. *"Forget about the former things,"* God says through the prophet, because there is something new God is doing ... or something new He is about to do. Perhaps this line should be added to Ecclesiastes 3: "There is a time to remember, and a time to forget."

In Dante's **Divine Comedy**, that fourteenth century epic poem of an allegorical trek through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise, the pilgrim finds two rivers at the end his trek through Purgatory on the border of Heaven. The first is the River Lethe; the second the river Eunoe. Lethe means Oblivion; Eunoe means well-minded. As the pilgrim bathes and immerses himself in the waters of the river Lethe, he emerges without any memory of his past failures, his past sins; the memory of them is washed away into oblivion. After bathing and immersing himself in the waters of Eunoe, he finds that the memory of all his good deeds in life is heightened, restored, sharpened. The waters of the river Lethe made him forget his past failures and shortcomings and sins; the waters of the river Eunoe made him remember only the good and right and noble things he had done in his life. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to find rivers like that? To be able to just forget all of our past failures, all of our past sins, and to be tormented by those memories no longer? And to remember only what we did in life that was good and right and wonderful and noble? For most of us it's just the opposite. We tend to forget what we've done right, we tend to forget all the past good we have done and all the things we have actually done well and all the blessings we have been or have given to others, but our memories are just haunted and even overwhelmed by things we've done wrong ... the things we have done or have left undone that have caused hurt or turmoil or pain. The good news is in Jesus Christ we are freed to forget, *and* we are freed to remember ... which, in turn, enables and encourages and frees us to press on to make and build more good memories.

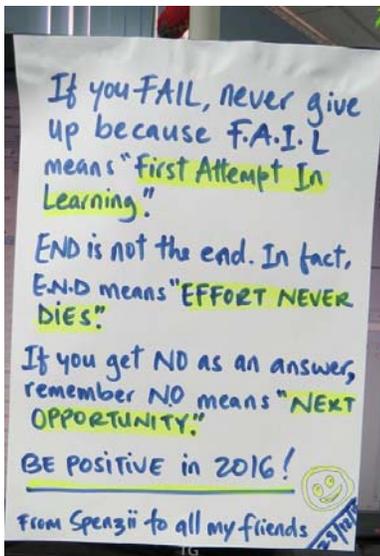
¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzGNMmSUm50> The homily begins at approximately 1:10 of the 1:36 recording

There's a time for remorse, there's a time to confess guilt, there's even a time for shame. But there comes a time to wash it all off in the name of Jesus Christ, to let it go, and to get moving forward again. Each and every Sunday we confess our sin in worship, and then we hear the words of the Assurance of Pardon. One danger of liturgy is that it can become rote, but if you really believe those words of assurance, you can't just sit there and say, "Well, that's nice." No, we've been forgiven, and we got to stand to our feet and get moving forward! We express that liturgically by jumping to our feet in grateful worship and song, singing glory to the Father! In Jesus Christ, the door of salvation is open, and we got to *get up* and walk through. Walk through, by the way, and don't look back. Later in the **Divine Comedy** an angel warns the pilgrim, "*To look back is to go back.*" If you've wasted a lot of time in life, don't waste more time looking back on the time you've wasted. If you made mistakes, let them go. You are never going to fix them completely. You are never going to have a better past than you have, so why do you want to keep looking back? In the grace and strength and by the direction of Jesus Christ, move ahead! All of us here have had our share of failure in our past; some more than their share. But there's nothing that makes it harder to progress in the spiritual journey than regretfully living in the past.

In our Epistle reading Paul documents his pedigree, his past as a faithful Jew. He has an impressive, formidable resume! There was more that could have gone on his list: his faithfulness as an apostle to the Gentiles, how many churches he started, how many pairs of sandals he wore out walking the literally thousands of miles he traveled, his beatings, his imprisonments, his sufferings for the sake of the gospel. But for Paul, none of that is what's important. He is "fahgeddingabowtit," laying it all aside to press on to higher and more important matters. He writes, "*But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" You know, Paul wrote those words during his imprisonment in Rome, the imprisonment which eventually ended in his execution. Yet he still writes, "*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" According to Paul, the key to faithful living is to press on, to keep moving. No athlete wins a race by constantly looking over his shoulder back at where he's been. Runners run the race by leaving the gate, focusing only on the goal, by pressing on toward it, persevering in the right direction. The right direction is AHEAD. Not behind. Turn your back on what is past and head toward the goal.

We know Paul had failures. He participated in the stoning of Stephen. And he spent all that time ravaging the church before his conversion, where he entered home after home dragging men and women off to prison where many met their deaths. Paul had some terrible, horrible moments in his past all while trying to be faithful to what he knew and to the old ways. But when he gave his life to Jesus on the road to Damascus, he also gave Jesus his failures. He placed them in His hands and left them there.

Like Paul, let us give our failures to Jesus. Yes, fix what you can, make restitution and apologies where possible, but ultimately place your failures in His hands and try to remember them no more ... *press on*, move forward. If we have made unwise decisions, horrible mistakes, or major errors in judgment, place them in Jesus' hands. And press on to be the person that God would have you be. Bathe in the River Lethe. If I may mix metaphors, walk through that gate called Forgiveness and *close* it behind you. There is nothing more futile than trying to change the past. Do what you can, then move on. Leave failure behind; leave it in the hands of Jesus. And press on to be the person God would have you be. Go on to make *good* memories, building on the good memories each and every one of us have to some degree or another. Bathe in the river Eunoe.



It took me all this time to get to the meaning of the sermon title. I came across a meme this past week while wasting time ... er, while doing sermon research on Face Book. It reads, "*If you fail, never give up because F.A.I.L. means 'First Attempt in Learning.' End is not the end. In fact, E.N.D. means 'Effort Never Dies.'* If you get No for an answer, remember N.O. means 'Next Opportunity.' Be positive in 2016!" So, I rearranged it a bit to get the sermon title "FAIL to NO END." By the grace and strength of Jesus Christ, your First Atttempt In Learning just leads to the Next Opportunity if your Effort Never Dies.

So, "*forget all of it,*" God says through Isaiah, "*I am about to do a new thing with your life*" So, too, for Paul; "*Forget it! And press on.*" Forget about it. The whole Bible is a long and eventful story about a God who is passionate about the future, and He wants us to go there! We tend to think of God as being somehow above, or over, the people; however, in the Bible God is more often depicted as *ahead* of the people, calling them forward, constantly calling them *out* and *into* new adventures. He is calling them ... He is calling us ... *forward*. The past is gone, the past is over, let's hear the voice of the God who is ahead of us, calling us into the new thing He is doing, calling us to FAIL TO NO END.