

**November 25, 2007**  
**Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:32-43**  
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**“The Power of Memory”**

What is it like to be forgotten? Cash Stillwater is a Cherokee who has known three generations of tragedy: a wife who died of cancer, a daughter who committed suicide and a granddaughter who is lost. Unable to live with the pain of these losses, Cash leaves his large extended tribal family in Oklahoma. He exists day by day as a “bag boy” at a health food store in a strange town where nobody knows him. At night he makes Native American jewelry.

Cash is a character in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *Pigs in Heaven*. Kingsolver writes:

“Cash misses his wife with a blank pain in his chest, and he misses his sisters and cousins, who have known him since he was a strong, good-looking boy. Everyone back there remembers or, if they are too young, they’ve been told. The old ones get to hang on to the sweet perfect past. Cash was the best at climbing trees...they all know. That’s the trouble with moving away from family, he realizes. You lose your youth entirely; you have only the small tired baggage that is carried within your body.” (p. 116)

When you leave all that is familiar and move to a new city, it is easy to feel forgotten. You change schools and nobody knows who you are. Sometimes life changes so much that you feel like life is passing you by and you are left behind. Months after the death of a spouse, the telephone rings less and less. You come home to a dark house and you wonder if anyone knows or even cares that you are alone.

Sometimes we may feel that even God has forgotten us. God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Israel and Judah who have been thrown into exile in many lands. War, suffering and defeat have cast them into distant lands of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. Jeremiah said that they are like sheep that have been scattered and have no shepherd to call them by name and gather them together. They feel forgotten.

Their experience is not unique. Throughout the Bible we hear the cries of people who feel forgotten. When Noah and his family were bobbing up and down in a leaky boat on an endless sea, they wondered if God would remember them. In the Book of Psalms we hear the voices of people who feel forgotten in the midst of their troubles, “How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1) Even Jesus on the cross cried out in the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As a pastor talking with people about their children, their marriages, their work or their health, I find that many people believe that God is distant from their trouble. They feel forgotten and cannot see where God is in the midst of their pain.

At times it is the things that we have done that cause us to feel far from God and forgotten by God. The Prodigal son took his share of his father’s money and went to a far country where he wasted all his money in riotous living. When he had no more money, his fair-weather friends abandoned him. When he was reduced to living with the pigs and envying the slop they had to eat, he wondered if he could go home. He wondered if his father would take him in.

At times it is the things that others do that make people wonder if God has forgotten them. Saira Shah lived her life in England, yet she was the daughter of an Afghan refugee whose family once ruled a part of Afghanistan for hundreds of years. As a child of two cultures, her storytelling father filled her mind with images of her family’s life in ancient Afghanistan. Her imagination was stirred by verbal pictures of beautiful gardens, exotic places, ancient hospitality and tribal culture. Longing to discover her father’s mythic Afghanistan, she became a young journalist and war correspondent. She ventured into Pakistan and Afghanistan first to find tribal groups at war with the Soviet Union and then to find a nation

at war with itself under the Taliban. She discovered not only an ancient culture and traditions, but she also uncovered cruelty, violence and untold human suffering. In her book, *The Storyteller's Daughter*, she tells the stories of people whose suffering was overlooked and forgotten. She produced the film, *Beneath the Veil*, that shows the violent abuse of Afghan women under the Taliban. These are stories that would be forgotten if Saira Shah did not risk her life to tell them. Her stories of human suffering cause us to wonder if God has forgotten the people of Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, North Korea, Sudan, Iraq and a dozen other places on the earth.

God does not forget human suffering; God does not ignore our distress and pain. God enters the world in Jesus Christ to walk the path that we all walk. As God says through the prophet Jeremiah, "I myself will gather... my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold..." (Jer. 23:3). God promised to raise up a new king for the people. This king would reign in righteousness. God remembered the promise. God raised up Jesus who lived our life, shared our joys and felt our pain.

The evil of the world conspired to destroy the memory of God's goodness. If such love can be wiped from the face of the earth, then there will be no memory of God's love and mercy. Jesus was convicted of blasphemy and sedition. According to Luke, they crucified him between two criminals. They hung a sign on his cross saying that he was the King of the Jews. Yet, he was a king like no other. He bore in his heart all the suffering, the sin and the disbelief of the world. Even as he was dying, he prayed for those who accused him falsely, for those who bruised his body, and for those who crucified him. He prayed for those who stood by in silence and uttered not one word to protest the injustice of it all. Jesus prayed for his friends who stood at a distance, helplessly watching everything. Jesus was never more a king than when he was enthroned upon the cross.

No, God does not forget our suffering; God does not forget the tragedies of the world. King Jesus takes our fear and pain into the very heart of God.

One of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus said to him, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." We do not know the nature of his crimes, but he freely admitted his wrongdoing. Was the world any better because he lived? We cannot say. In the balance, did he do more good than evil? We do not know. Would there be people left who would weep for him and remember him? We know of no monument to his memory. From the perspective of history, here was a man soon to be forgotten by the world. From the perspective of Jesus, here was a man who would be remembered by God. The power of God's memory is that God remembers the ones the world forgets.

The power of God's memory is this: as God remembers, God forgives. I used to think that forgiveness was all about forgetting. You say something that hurts a friend and that friend says, "Forget it; don't worry about it." Forgetting may work when the wound is not deep and the hurt is not severe. Forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting. I had difficulty understanding this until I heard Dr. Donald Shriver, the former President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, say that forgiveness is not forgetting; it is a special way of remembering.

Forgiveness is a special way of remembering. To forgive is to bear in one's own heart the hurt caused by another. To forgive is to acknowledge the wrong and then to forgive the wrong, not by forgetting it, but by remembering it without storing up anger or seeking revenge. In forgiving, we make a choice about what we do with the memory of the hurt. In Jesus Christ, God chooses to forgive. There will never be peace between warring tribes, ethnic groups, races or religions until we learn to choose something other than revenge - until we learn to forgive as God forgives.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"Today, you shall be with me in Paradise."

Jesus remembered that this man who sinned was a child of God. Jesus took into the heart of God this man's pain and this man's life. He forgave the sin and welcomed him home.

God does not forget us. In the compassion of Jesus, we see how God hears our cries of pain. In the cross of Christ, all the good and bad that ever was is gathered together and taken into the heart of God. No matter how far we have run from home, no matter what the world thinks of us, no matter what the world has done to us, no matter if the world has forgotten us, God remembers. It is the gracious memory of God that matters most. God remembers us and welcomes us home.