

## **“Do Look Back”**

“... and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

### **Don’t Look Back!**

I have never been a great athlete, but one sport that I had some semblance of talent was running track in high school. Because of my long legs I was relatively successful in running both short and long-distance races and soon found myself on the school track team competing in meets with other high schools in our area. I was even selected to be on one of the relay teams that involved not only running fast but passing the baton on to the next runner, which involved a lot of practice and coordination. At one practice, we were working on baton passing and running our leg of the race when our coach continually repeated the same line: **“Don’t look back!”** He wasn’t referring to looking back for the baton that was being passed into our hands, but to when it was our turn to run the race, since looking backward often meant that a runner would slow down and be in danger of losing. We were being taught to keep our focus on the finish line, not on where we had been or who might be gaining on us from the other team.

### **Don’t Look Back.**

In Grade Eleven, my high school offered a driver’s education class for all students that involved both classroom work to prepare us for the state’s written test as well as learning to drive with an instructor in the seat next to us. This proved invaluable to me as it provided me with lessons on driving skills that I still use today; one of these skills was the proper use of mirrors when driving. While our instructor emphasized the importance of checking both our rear-view and side-view mirrors frequently, he also cautioned us to not give what was behind us too much attention. He would often repeat the words of our track coach: **“Don’t look back too often; focus on what is ahead of you.”**

### **Don’t look back.**

Last September, I went back to the school where I ran on the track team and learned to drive. It was a wonderful time to gather with my classmates for our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion, to share memories and stories of the time we spent together in those formative years. It was a reminder to me that even though I have not lived in my hometown for many years, it still plays a role in the person I am today. But I also realized that the town in which I was born and raised no longer exists; the people I knew in my old neighbourhood are gone, many of the landmarks have disappeared, and even the memories we shared at the reunion exist only in our memories. As Don Henley once sang, *“a little voice inside my head said don’t look back – you can never look back.”*

### **Don’t look back.**

There are numerous occasions when God’s people were encouraged to look forward toward where God was leading them instead of looking back to former days that may have seemed to be better than the current circumstances in which they found themselves. In the message he was called to proclaim to the Babylonian exiles, the prophet Isaiah shared the word of the Lord which encouraged God’s people to *“do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* (Isaiah 43:18-19). In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul speaks of focusing not on the past but on the future that the Lord has set before him: *“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heaven call of God in Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 3:13-14). In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle calls upon his readers to consider what it means to be a new creation through Jesus Christ, no longer looking back to what once existed but forward to what it now means to be reconciled to God through Christ our Lord:

- “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, no counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” – 2 Corinthians 5:16-19.

In many places, the Word of God encourages God’s people to no longer look back at where they have been but to look forward toward what lies ahead in our future

which is God's future because of our baptism into the Church which is the Body of Christ.

- “A Christian is a new creature, or newly created work of God who speaks, thinks, and judges all things in a different way from the world’s speaking and judging. Being a new person, all things do become new, here in this life through faith, and afterward in the life to come, through openly revealing their nature … They therefore have a foretaste here of the future life, where everything will become new before their eyes and in the full light of day made new, as they now think and picture it through faith, according to their new nature.” – Martin Luther, 1522.

But these biblical teachings that encourage us to look forward instead of looking back do not mean that we should ignore the past or erase it from our collective memory; for there are many places where God’s people are encouraged to **do look back**, to remember all that God has done for them in the past so that they might better understand what it means to be people of God in the present and in the future. In both testaments we have examples of remembrance of things past as the basis for faith and hope that provides “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*” (ELW Hymn 733):

- “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.” – Exodus 12:14.
- “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:21-23.
- “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” – 1 Corinthians 11:23-24.

Remembrance of God’s faithfulness in the past is the basis for God’s case against the people in today’s first lesson from the book of the prophet Micah. Little is known about this eighth century BC Judean prophet; the book’s superscription associates Micah (whose name means “who is like the LORD?”) with the reigns of three Judean kings: Jothan (742-735 BC), Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-687). Micah was from Moresheth, a small village southwest of Jerusalem. Despite this lack of biographical information, the book discloses details of the prophet’s theology and religious fervor:

- Micah's identification with the poor and oppressed ("The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever." – 2:9).
- The certainty that Micah has been called to prophesy by the LORD ("But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin." – 3:8).
- Micah's anger at the Judean leaders responsible for Jerusalem's impending death ("Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." – 3:12).
- "Into this time of great change, when the fortunes of God's people had already declined, and promised to get worse, Micah stepped forward to provide the theological interpretation of crucial events facing the nation and its people." – Daniel Simundson.

Today's lesson begins with a courtroom scene in which the prophet summons Israel to hear God's lawsuit against them: "*Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.*" (6:1). The Lord invites Israel to plead its case before the jury of mountains and hills, "*which have endured since creation [and] serve as witnesses to Israel's repeated acts of injustice*" (Gregory L. Cuellar). God has heard the complaints of the people who wonder whether God is just when they are punished while other, more wicked nations continue to prosper; God responds by bringing a lawsuit against the people who have broken the covenant God has established with them: "*Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.*" (6:2). Israel has broken the covenant; God has not. If disasters are the result of that disobedience, God cannot be declared unjust. The mountains and the hills will serve as the jury ("*He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people.*" – Psalm 50:4).

In this courtroom setting, God now speaks directly to make God's case before the people: "*O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*" (6:3). The great God who delivered the people from Egypt has somehow become burdensome to them. God recites a short version of salvation history, a kind of creed that recalls key periods of Israel's history when God's activity was seen most clearly: rescue from Egypt; leadership through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam; and protection against the schemes of Balak and Balaam. If the people will

only remember these and other saving acts of God, they will never waver from following God's way, and subsequently life will continue to go well for them. God calls the people to look back, to remember which means to fully identify with the ancient stories as living examples of the ongoing presence and power of God in every age; "*Micah calls the community to remember not for nostalgia's sake but to reanimate a collective identity grounded in liberation theory.*" (Cuellar).

After God has made the case in this trial setting, it is the people's turn to respond, asking what God expects of them. The questions are related to participation in Israel's sacrificial cult, to what constitutes an acceptable offering: "*With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?*" (6:6). The questions about quantity gradually rise to ridiculous levels, ending with the suggestion that God may even require the giving of a human life:

- "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" – 6:6b-7.

The suggestion that God may require human sacrifice runs counter to the biblical evidence that Israel had looked with horror on such practices ("*You took your sons and daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured.*" – Ezekiel 16:20). The people's questions push the point to the extreme: does anything suffice to move God to accept me, even if I have defied God repeatedly, and wish to return to a closer relationship?

- "The exaggerated offerings – burnt offerings, thousands of rams, rivers of oil, even the firstborn – expose the futility of attempting to buy divine favour through sacrifice. Micah's prophetic irony unmasks the absurdity of a transactional faith that confuses ritual performance with moral integrity." – Cuellar.

The Lord's answer changes the question. God is more interested in the way people live their everyday lives than in their religious practices: "*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (6:8). In Micah's vision, right worship cannot be severed from right relationship; piety divorced from justice is idolatry. "Justice" (*mispat*) is something that people do; it is not enough to wish for justice and complain because it is lacking. "Kindness" (*hesed*) has to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness; Israel's relationship of faithfulness to God is initiated by

love. To “walk humbly with your God” (*Halak*) means to put God first and to live in conformity with God’s Will, the call to discipleship of which Jesus speaks when he declares that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24). Because of God’s faithfulness in former times, the people in the present age are to live as God desires, to hear God’s Word and live in accordance with God’s Will.

- “These key verses from Micah are about lifestyle, one’s total outlook on life, and one’s ethical values. They reject the simplistic notion that there is one thing Israel can do (ritually or otherwise) to make things right between God and the people.” – Simundson.

There are times when it is important that we heed the call to **don’t look back**, to focus our attention on days of old as if they were the only times when we were blessed or when God was present among us. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to forget the reality of those former times and focuses only on what was good without remembering what was bad: “*nostalgia is a file that removes the rough edges from the good old days*” (Doug Larson). As looking backward can impede a runner from winning the race or a driver from focusing on the road ahead, we must resist the temptation to think that God’s blessing in former times is no longer available to us in the present age. But there are also times in which we are encouraged to **do look back**, to remember all that God has done for us in the basis as the basis for our hope for today and for the future. It is the God who has been “our hope in ages past” who is also “our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home” (ELW Hymn 632). We remember what God has done for us in Jesus Christ so that through looking back on his death and resurrection we may have the blessed assurance that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (Romans 6:5). We are called to receive the Body and Blood of Christ “*in remembrance of me*” so that we might know that this Holy Supper of which we partake is a “*foretaste of the feast to come*” when the Lord will make for all peoples “*a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines ... Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken*” (Isaiah 25:6-9). We look back on what God has done for us in the past so that we might know today and always that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, that God’s kingdom will come and that the Will of God will be accomplished “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

- “So ‘be strong, take courage.’ God is on the side of life; and we, who (it’s true) are often strangely attracted to death, may nevertheless be raised to life

– enticed away from death – by the God who brought Jesus from the dead. By grace, we can learn, not only how to recognize the goodness of God in the land of the living, but how to participate in it ourselves – how to be stewards of that mysterious, transforming goodness.” – Douglas John Hall.

Biblical wisdom teaches us that “*for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven*” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). There is a time for us to heed the call to **don’t look back**, to avoid focusing on the past as the only time when God’s blessings were present. There is also a time for us to **do look back**, to remember all that God has done for us in former days as the basis for our hope for God’s blessing among us today and in the future, so that we may never forget that “*though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet,*” and that the God who has been our help in ages past will “*be our guard while troubles last and our eternal home.*”

Amen.