

“We Will Remember”

Psalm 85

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/we-will-remember/>

Last weekend my family was in Lawrence, Kansas, for my nephew’s basketball tournament. (Go Jayhawks. – Just kidding please don’t walk out. That was primarily a jab at our summer youth intern, Ally Grosvenor, who goes to KState, home of the WildCats). Anyway, when we go to these away games, I usually share a hotel room with my parents to help save money and to remind us all why it is important for adult children to get their own place.

One evening after a long day we returned to our hotel room to settle in for the evening, and at some point, I noticed my dad walking around the room looking for something in random places. He was checking the tops of the end tables and looking on the floor and patting down the pockets on his shorts. So, I asked him, “Dad, are you looking for something?” He responded, “my glasses”. So, my mom and I joined in the search via a hundred questions – “when did you last have them?”, “Did you bring them in from the car?”; “Did you leave them at the restaurant?” “did you have them on when you went to the front desk to get more towels?” You know, all the questions people who have been looking for something really appreciate and have not already asked themselves a hundred times.

Dad walked down to the car and checked. He checked with the front desk. He came back to the room empty handed.

I remembered (unfortunately after he had made all those trips) that I had seen him sitting on the end of the bed on his phone. And we all knew there was no way he would have been able to read anything on his phone without his glasses. So, I sat down in the spot I remembered him sitting and just looked from that perspective. And there on the ground, under the luggage rack, blending into the carpet about two feet away, were his glasses. We don’t know how they ended up there and we didn’t really care.

What we do know is this: **when you lose something, retrace your steps.**

I’m going to guess we’ve all lost something material before. Car keys, a phone, a document. Just Friday night I was eating dinner outside downtown with some friends when a young lady came by looking for something. She’d lost her keys downtown the day before and she was retracing her steps ... and picking up the tickets that had accumulated on her windshield.

But we’ve also loose things that are not material. We lose dreams and hope and faith and love.

- A dream job becomes drudgery because we’ve lost what was meaningful about it, what made us excited to say yes to it in the beginning.

- A marriage crumbles because we lost love and intimacy buried under years of neglect and blame.
- A medical diagnose that makes you lose faith.
- Yet another letdown – a relationship that goes nowhere, a promotion that goes elsewhere, not enough money to go anywhere – and you lose hope.

I just came off a wonderful summer. Great trips, wonderful times with people and mission teams, rich moments seeing God at work at home and around the world and participating in that work. And yet ... this week I find myself struggling. The transition is always hard from being on the go all the time, but this one has been harder. When I travel and have a busy schedule, I can mentally and emotionally check out of the things in my everyday life that are not as I dream them to be, not as I hope them to be. The summer is often two months of distractions from the hard things. But when I return home, I find all the things I left behind still waiting for me alongside the piles of mail and magazines and dust.

I am a peacemaker by nature. A lover, not a fighter. I hate conflict. I want harmony and peace and love and unicorns and endless amounts of chocolate ice cream for everyone.

But our current world is anything but that. There is real pain and real anger. There is justified conflict and crises all around us and within us as hard things too long ignored are being brought out into the light. Some days it simply feels like we've lost our way. Some days it feels like God's promises and God's presence are missing, and we're out here frantically tossing couch cushions left and right looking for some sign that God is still at work and that God is still in control.

- When things aren't what we hope them to be, how can we believe?
- When we are kept awake at night in anger, astonishment, and agony about what is happening around us and among us, how do we act in hope?
- When hate has the microphone and evil cranks the volume, how can we hear any other song?

Psalm 85 is a song for such a time as this. It is a song about a people, who in the midst of communal distress, have lost their way and need to retrace their steps to remember the promises of God so they can move forward in faith.

According to many bible scholars, the context of Psalm 85 is most likely after the Israelites return home after living in exile, as captives in a foreign land. For 70 years they held onto a promise from God that God would free them from captivity and return them to the home of their childhood, the home of their family, the land of promise. They had dreamed of this day. They had told the stories of their homeland over and over around campfires and kitchen tables and water coolers, in hushed tones and hope-drenched whispers. They did this so they would remember and to hold onto the one thing that could not be taken captive – hope.

And God did as God promised. He freed them from captivity. But for those who chose to return home, they came back to a very different home. All was not what they remembered it to be or had been told it would be. There were things they felt were missing. Important things like God's promises and God's presence.

Do you ever feel like God's promises and presence are missing in your life? Do you ever feel like God led you somewhere God promised to take you, but it isn't what you thought it would be? Do you ever feel scared or anxious about the hard things in your life or in the lives of people in our world or country and find yourself wondering whether good will ever prevail, whether God has forgotten us?

I have and I do. And when this occurs, when it feels like I've lost my way, the only thing I know to do is to retrace my steps; to remind myself that even though I'm struggling to see it now, God is good, and God keeps God's promises.

This happens a lot in the psalms and Psalm 85 is an example of this. The Israelites are in a crisis and questioning whether God is still with them and for them. The first three verses look back to former blessings to help the Israelites retrace their steps and find hope again. The next four verses speak to God in the present distress. The last verses look forward to future hope.

V.1-3

LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

²You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.

³You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

The author of Psalm 85 is reminding the listener, lest they forget, of all the ways God has shown up for them in the past and all the things the LORD has done. When things are tough, when our world is out of sorts, when we feel lost, we must remember what is truth by retracing what we know to be true about God. God – you have shown favor, you've restored, you have forgiven, you have pardoned, you have softened your anger with love. We don't hope these things are true; we KNOW they are true. We lived them.

Maybe you hear this and you're thinking, "that's great and all, Mel, but I don't have anything to bear witness to. I don't have any faith steps to retrace. I don't see where God has ever shown favor to me, forgiven me, restored me." In moments like these, perhaps our family stories can be the witness you need until you recognize or experience your own stories to tell. That is what we are doing this morning – telling one of our stories of faith to encourage and guide us and help us remember.

A few years ago, when she was 9 years old, my niece drew a picture and wrote a devotion for our Advent devotion book here at the church. She drew and colored this precious heart and rainbow picture and wrote these words: *God created beautiful rainbows to make a promise. God keeps His promises. God created me. God loves me and keeps His promises to me. I love God.*

Morgan had heard us at home and here at this church tell of the promises of God. She believed these things about God – not necessarily because she experienced them herself or could recognize them in her life yet – but because those around her at home and in this family of faith talk about the times God has kept God’s promises. And because she trusts us, she claimed these stories of God’s faithfulness as her own. If they were true for us, they must be true for her as well. Hopefully, she has or will soon have her own stories of God’s faithfulness in her life that she will add to our family faith stories.

Each time we do a baby dedication here at First Baptist we promise, we vow, we covenant to tell the stories of our faith to this new life who has been entrusted to this family. We say these lines aloud together as a covenant, “As this child grows into childhood, we are called to invite him to experience the stories of our faith, that he may one day claim his place in God’s story through baptism. We will tell this child about Abraham and Sarah, Miriam, Moses, Ruth, Mary and Joseph, the apostles, and the mothers and fathers of the Church through the ages.”

Church – we must tell over and over again about God’s goodness and faithfulness in our lives and in our larger family story, so we remember who God is. When we lose our way, these stories help us retrace our steps back to the promises of God.

As Morgan wrote, God loves us and keeps God’s promises to us. That is what the first 3 verses of Psalm 85 tells us, too.

Yet ... that doesn’t mean we don’t go through difficult times.

The next four verses deal with a present crisis: v. 4 - 7

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us.

Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

Will you not revive us again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?

Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

One of the reasons I love the Psalms is because they are honest. About 70% of the psalms are laments or psalms of supplication, including Psalm 85. Psalms in which the psalmists offer a cry for help and a description of their troubles, but then strive to work through to a statement of

trust ('God, despite all that's happening, and it is happening, I still trust you'). Laments ask for deliverance from hard times and vow praise to God for that anticipated deliverance.

Laments are honest and real in their frustration and fear and anger. BUT they don't end on that note. They always find their way to trust and hope DESPITE present circumstances and they usually do that by retracing their steps through the faith stories of God's steadfast love.

A few years ago, musician Michael Gungor tweeted, "Approximately 70 percent of the Psalms are laments. Approximately 0 percent of the top 150 songs sung most in churches today are laments." He got a lot of push back with that tweet. People didn't feel like we should sing "sad songs" in church because, after all, we have Jesus.

Psalms 85 (and the other songs of lament) would say we can, and we should, sing about both. Both the hard things, the broken things, the things that hurt as well as the hope we have in Christ.

Our world is looking for real. We are desperate for real. To come week after week and never acknowledge that it **feels** like God has forgotten us or has fallen down on the job, well, that isn't real.

Some days verses 4-7 of this Psalm feel so true to me. Are you angry with us, God? Do you still care? Will you still restore us? Some days it feels like the nation is in a nose-dive, and I question whether God is still flying the plane or whether God strapped on a parachute and jumped out while we're busy pushing all the buttons – both on the control panel and within each other. I mean, who could blame God for bailing on us?

In these moments when it feels like I've lost my way and fear and doubt are writing the story, I have to retrace my steps and remember. I remember all the faith stories that bear witness to a God who does not quit. A God who brings order out of chaos. A God who goes to extraordinary lengths to save God's beloved. A God who intentionally leads us through wilderness in order to get us to a promised land on the other side. A God who is trustworthy. A God of peace and justice. A God who is GOOD.

The last six verses of Psalm 85 are hopeful words for now and for the future, and this section of the psalm is often used at Advent as we anticipate the birth of Christ who embodies these verses:

"Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
 for he will speak peace to his people,
 to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.[a]
 9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
 that his glory may dwell in our land.

- 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- 12 The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Having retraced their steps in their faith story with God, there is now something solid again to build their hope upon, something true for us to build our hope on. Even though things might still be broken, and pain may still be present, God will speak peace to his people. God's covenant with us is still binding. God has not forgotten us. God has not forsaken us.

God's salvation, God's dream is in motion and this is what it looks like: steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace working together in harmony. Kindness and truth shall meet. Justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring outside the earth. Justice will shower down heaven.

This is the work God is doing.
This is the work we are commanded to do, too.

When you lose something, retrace your steps.

When we feel we've lost our way, when our faith is faltering or we question whether God is at work and we find ourselves losing hope, follow the pattern of Psalm 85:

1. **Remember God's faithfulness.** Tell the stories, recall what we know to be true about God. What stories of God's faithfulness can we see? Where has God been at work in our lives or the lives of others in the past that can guide us through the distress of the present and lead us into the future with faith and trust?
2. **Request God's help.** Let's be real and honest about our struggles. Like the laments of the psalms, let's offer a cry for help and a description of our troubles, and yet strive to work through to a statement of trust.
3. **Reside in God's promises.** God's dream is in motion. Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace are working together in harmony and embodied in Jesus Christ and the Church. Let's join God in the dream by being people of love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace.

When I was studying this Psalm, there was a song we sing that kept coming to mind. "We will remember." Here is part of the song.

We will remember, we will remember
We will remember the works of Your hands
We will stop and give you praise
For great is Thy faithfulness

When we walk through life's darkest valleys
We will look back at all You have done
And we will shout, our God is good
And He is the faithful One

For our invitation time, we are going to sing this song together as our prayer, our anthem, our battle cry as we leave today. We will remember. When we walk through life's darkest valleys, we will look back at all You have done, and we will remember.

BENEDICTION based on Psalm 85

Lord, let us see your kindness.
Look upon your people with mercy.
Let your unfailing love and truth come together among us;
let your righteousness and peace surround us.
Pour out your goodness upon us,
that we may worship and serve you all our days.
Amen.