Sermon in three parts:
Forgetting to Remember

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Deuteronomy 8:10-18

May 28, 2017
MESSAGE #1

This is a different kind of Sunday. Normally, I preach a sermon three times on a Sunday. Today, I preach only one! I feel as though I am slacking off. I decided to give my message in thirds this morning. This will help you listen differently.

Let me center what we are doing this Memorial weekend. On May 30, 1868, 5000 people gathered at nearby Arlington National Cemetery. James Garfield, a general in the Union Army and member of Congress, gave the keynote address. Garfield later served as America’s 20th president until his assassination after 200 days in office. Following his speech, the crowd placed flowers on the graves of 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers. It was the first official Decoration Day observed annually at Arlington Cemetery and towns across America.

Fast forward to 1971 when Congress voted to rename Decoration Day. Memorial Day became a national holiday to honor all service men and women who died in defense of their country.

The 3rd Infantry Division of the U.S. Army (The Old Guard) participated in their annual “Flags In” ritual this past Thursday. This honor guard placed 330,000 flags alongside every grave at Arlington Cemetery.

This 1971 Act of Congress also designated Memorial Day as the last Monday in May, effectively creating a three-day weekend. Memorial Day has morphed into the unofficial start of summer and a barrage of patio and mattress sales.
While events like ViVa! Vienna! have their place, let us not forget “the last full measure of devotion” Abraham Lincoln spoke about in his 1863 Gettysburg Address. Why has this day of remembering led to so much forgetting?

The video, prayer and musical tribute in this worship service attempt to honor the expressed purpose of Memorial Day. We observe Memorial Day not only as Americans, but as followers of Jesus Christ. We just concluded six months’ worth of sermons from the Gospel of John. Jesus said in John 15, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for his friends” (15:3). Truer words were never spoken! There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life in sacrifice for someone else. Jesus not only preached about laying down his life, he lived it.

MESSAGE #2

When my children were young, they loved watching Sesame Street. True confession: I enjoyed it also. Forgetful Jones was one of Sesame Street’s most loveable characters. He dressed in his customary cowboy attire and had a girlfriend named Clementine. True to his name, Forgetful Jones was always forgetting things. He would forget why he was running the bath water or the name of his horse Buster.

I identify with Forgetful Jones. I am always forgetting things. I forget people’s names. I forget birthdays. I cannot remember my security passwords. I have had the experience of walking into a room and forgetting what I am looking for.

We devise techniques to help us remember. My grandparents used to tie a string around their finger to help them
remember. We post notes around the house to spur our memory or program our cell phones to remind us of important things.

*Remember* is an epic Biblical word. “*Remember* the Lord our God” (Deuteronomy 8:18). “*Remember* the Sabbath Day to keep it holy” (Deuteronomy 5:12). *Remember* appears 200 times in Scripture. Abraham Heschel, a preeminent Biblical scholar, has said, “Much of what the Bible demands can be summed up in a single word—*remember.*”

What we are doing in worship this morning is an act of *remembering*. We come together each Sunday to remember God’s faithfulness.

Jesus calls us to *remember* his sacrifice. His words appear prominently on the Lord’s Table, “Do this in *remembrance* of me.” *Remember* his teaching. *Remember* his life. *Remember* his death and resurrection. This seems like an ideal time to invite our children to join Beth Crowder and me at the front to *remember* Jesus.

**MESSAGE #3**

Deuteronomy is the fifth book in the Bible. Deuteronomy is a book all about *remembering*. *Remember* appears 15 times in Deuteronomy. “Do not forget” is referenced 14 times in the same book.

Deuteronomy is a compound of two Greek words, *deutero* meaning second and *nomos* meaning law. Deuteronomy is a word that literally translates “second law.”
God gave people the first law at Mt. Sinai after escaping slavery in Egypt. The Ten Commandments come to us this way. Forty years later, God’s people arrive at the Promised Land. Moses, who is now at the end of his life, delivers the second law in Deuteronomy that is essentially a recapitulation of the first law in Exodus. Moses addresses the next generation of God’s people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. Moses is concerned about what will happen to God’s people when they settle down. He fears they will forget the Lord when they build their houses, expand their holdings and increase their wealth. Twice he warns them not to forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery in Egypt (8:11, 14).

In Deuteronomy, Moses recalls God’s covenant faithfulness over the past forty years. He reminds them how God miraculously supplied them with water from a rock and manna from heaven (8:15-16). He expresses concern that they will come to believe that, “My power and strength of my hand have produced this wealth for me” (8:17).

Verse 18 provides the clincher, “Remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.” Remember!

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two observations come to mind from these two “do not forget” passages.
My first observation goes back to verse 11: “Do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees I am giving you this day.” Where do we find God’s commands, laws and decrees? Scripture compiles God’s commands and decrees to promote human flourishing. That is why we urge you to read the Bible so you can become acquainted with God’s commands and decrees.

Some of you imagine that when I talk about reading the Bible I am addressing my remarks to the person seated in the next pew. No, actually, I’m talking to you. I am urging you to begin an intentional reading plan of the Bible so that you can become familiar with the things God considers important for us to know and put into practice.

Let me share with you my Bible reading plan. I read a chapter of the Bible every morning. I write down verses in a notebook that interest me. Yesterday, I read chapter 46 in Jeremiah: “‘Do not be afraid, my servant, for I will surely save you…Do not be afraid, my servant, for I am with you,’ says the Lord” (46:27-28). I close this time of reading in prayer. Since I have just read about fear, I pray about things that make me afraid, like our Ignite campaign, the weather forecast next Sunday or challenging situations in family life. I take this notebook to the gym with me and meditate on verses such as Jeremiah 46 as I pass the time on the Elliptical Machine.

Tailor your Bible reading to fit your temperament and schedule. You need not do it my way. Do it in a way that works for you. Let me remind you why we read Scripture. We read Scripture as a way to help us remember God.
My second observation has to do with the other “Do not forget” admonition in Deuteronomy 8. “When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and the land of slavery” (8:12-14).

These words hit affluent suburbanites like us right between the eyes. We are all about building fine homes and increasing our bottom line. Don’t miss the progression in these verses. Prosperity breeds complacency. Complacency fosters pride. Pride causes us to forget about God.

Moses proposes a remedy to counteract this materialism threat. Moses instructs people in Deuteronomy 12-14 to bring their offerings and sacrifices, tithes and special gifts to worship with them (12:11). Why does God instruct His people to offer their flocks and herds when God already owns the cattle on the thousand hills? Go back into today’s passage. Otherwise, they will become proud and wealth will go to their head. Giving is one tangible way of expressing gratitude for God’s generosity in our lives.

We are nearing the end of our Ignite campaign. We have raised 3.5 million toward our five million dollar goal. For the record, I will stop talking about Ignite when we reach our goal. This goal is entirely achievable if everybody does his or her part. Some of you may be thinking you will sit this one out or possibly move away in a few years. Let me ask you to reconsider your participation in Ignite. Where can you find a gift with an eternal return on your investment? Your
gift will make it possible for us to reach more people for Jesus Christ. Moses instructed the people of God to bring their tithes and special gifts to worship. This could be an ideal time for you to grow toward the Biblical concept of the tithe. Calculate the percentage you currently give to the Lord’s work and grow that number until you reach ten percent.

Sure, we need your help. Yet the converse is also true. We need to give every bit as much as we are able. God wants this church to overflow with generosity.

I talked earlier about Memorial Day. Why does this day of remembering lead to so much forgetting? The same thing can happen in our relationship with God. We forget to remember. Don’t forget to remember. Remember God’s commands and decrees. Remember God’s generosity.

don’t forget to REMEMBER