



*Preaching as Reminding:
Stirring Memory in an Age
of Forgetfulness*
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“Preaching as Reminding wonderfully combines thoughtful wisdom about preaching with actual examples of the real thing, helping us recognize the difference between saying God is good and saying God is ‘still good,’ or the freshness of describing Christmas as a riches-to-rags story. . . . Preachers are the still small voice that says ‘Wake up.’ It does not matter how profound the message; what matters is that someone wakes up. So read. Take notes. Learn. Remember.”

—From the foreword by **John Ortberg**

The Preacher’s Call: Not Originality, but the Stirring of Memory

The phrase “the Lord’s remembrancers” was coined in 1594 by Lancelot Andrewes, chaplain to Queen Elizabeth and King James I, in a sermon titled “Remember Lot’s Wife.” Andrewes was drawing his metaphor from the royal court. The king’s (or queen’s) remembrancer is the oldest judicial position in continual existence in Great Britain, having been created in 1154 by Henry II. Today it is a ceremonial role, but for centuries the remembrancer’s job was to put the lord treasurer and the barons of court in remembrance of pending business, taxes paid and unpaid, and other things that pertained to the benefit of the crown.

Likewise, Andrewes said, preachers are the “Lord’s remembrancers.” We remind God’s subjects of their covenant with the king of heaven. The sovereign king initiated a relationship with his people motivated by grace and sealed with his own blood, and he demands that they respond with worship, service, love, and fear.

As part of Andrewes’s exposition of Luke 17:32, where our Lord said, “Remember Lot’s wife,” the court preacher quotes Hebrews 2:1: “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” “Drifting” is a haunting image that suggests that we can slip our mooring. The corrective, according to Andrewes, is preaching. He states that “preaching [is] employed . . . as much in calling to their minds the things they know and have forgot, as in teaching them the things they know not.”

A century and a half later, Jonathan Edwards put it this way: “God hath appointed . . . preaching . . . as a fit means . . . to stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, setting them in their proper colours, though they know them, and have been fully instructed in them.”

One of most crucial functions preaching accomplishes, a function often neglected in homiletics textbooks, is the stirring of memory. We need not—indeed we should not—scurry about like a character in a video game searching for originality. That is not our calling.

Both Andrewes and Edwards were probably aware of Augustine’s profound meditations on memory in the *Confessions* in which he suggests why memory must be stirred. Using the metaphor of the cave, he describes how we shove things we have learned into hidden recesses so that unless they are drawn out by admonition, we will never think of them. Augustine also compares memory to a storehouse and field. A remembrancer is a servant who brings things from the storehouse, a farmer who helps the listener harvest memories previously planted. Augustine’s most striking metaphor for memory may be the “stomach of the mind” (*venter animi*), where food is stored without tasting but later brought forth for

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rumination. This metaphor strikes the modern ear as odd and even repulsive, but the image is brilliant. It implies that memories are held and digested, eventually nourishing the whole body. The remembrancer helps people ruminate.

Today's metaphors for memory have moved away from storage to mechanisms of capturing and sorting. In the twentieth century the camera metaphor was popular, conceiving of memory as catching images on blank film. Today we favor the computer metaphor to suggest how our minds sort and retrieve data. Both of these have merit, but as with all metaphors they obscure as well as reveal. They imply that memories are always accurate because they are captured and stored mechanically, but, as we will see in chapter two, this is not the case. Humans are not machines. For one thing, we forget; and for another, we actively select, highlight, and discard elements from the past to form a cohesive narrative that makes sense in the present.

To counter the human propensity to edit memories, God has given us narrative and ceremony. The majority of the Bible is narrative, a fixed account of God's action in redemptive history, and he commands children of the covenants to recall those actions with concrete ceremonies such as the Passover and the Lord's Supper. However we describe it—using images of cave, storehouse, field, stomach, camera, or computer—one of the preacher's main callings is to make knowledge, values, and experience present once again. Ministers must serve as the Lord's remembrancers because things learned can be buried, lost, amputated, or corrupted. That is why Peter said, "I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them. . . . I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder" (2 Pet 1:12-13). Ministers take their cue from Peter, devoting themselves to the work of stirring memory.

I hope preaching as reminding strikes you as good news if you have been shamed into believing that every sermon has to include novel ideas. No. Telling the old, old story stands in the front rank of the preacher's calling. Some may raise a skeptical eyebrow. "Preaching as reminding sounds monotonous," they say. "Repeating what believers have heard since they were children sounds like a homiletical nightmare, like preaching Christmas fifty-two weeks a year." But when it is done well, preaching as reminding is not empty repetition, formalistic and perfunctory. Rather, it is the work of soul-watchers. Our people need reminders of the great truths of the faith. We are like the hobbits who "liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions." Not only do people need reminders, but they also enjoy them.

— Adapted from the introduction