



The Lord Remembers ... And?

TEXT
Luke 1:11–13,
18–22, 57–64

December 29, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

It is that very special time of year: my time-honored tradition of getting a little obsessed with lists. I start looking up best albums of the past year, best books in various genres, best TV shows and movies. Of course, the Internet in general offers no shortage of other fun lists: best tweets, best recipes, best memes, best phones, best Instagrams — and so on.

I have a few lists I put together as well (for which I judge to be the appropriate amount of testing at home): I keep track of books read in a given year and set about tallying pages — and yes, I color-code by genre. I look over my Garmin app to see miles run and miles biked. There's the address lists for Christmas cards. And yesterday I even started some lists for my taxes.

We are also at the end of a decade, which offers even more lists for my obsession: best of the decade lists are always interesting to me because it reveals how things age. Something that was the best of 2011 or 2012 may not hold up so well as we close out 2019. In fact, I just read a post from someone who picks his favorite movie each year, and he went back over the last 10 years to see if, in hindsight, he

would still agree with his past self. He not surprisingly had a lot of revisions.

In general, when we look over the past year, or the past 10 years, in certain ways it affords us some perspective by which we can assess the present — or at least assess our present selves.

I'm not sure to what degree Zechariah reflected on his life at the end of a given year. But I can say with confidence that the year in which we find him in today's reading would go down as a "best of."

Zechariah was an old man, receiving an honor that some temple priests go their whole lives never receiving. He is chosen to enter the presence of the Holy of Holies. And while he had never done so before, I don't imagine it was common for a priest to encounter an angel of the Lord in that space — you would think word of that kind of thing would get around. And thus, for Zechariah, it was a particular honor within a particular honor.

What's more, the angel comes to deliver news of another event that was surprising: Zechariah will become a parent; his wife will bear a son. And this son, said the angel, will be called John.

In a list of surprises — being chosen, being visited by an angel and getting the news of a child on the way — the name would have been yet another surprise. In the tradition of the time, Zechariah's son's name would in all likelihood have also been Zechariah — the implication in doing so is that this son will follow in the footsteps of his father, carry on the name and work of his father.

In this case, his son should have carried on not just the work of Zechariah, but also the meaning of Zechariah's name, which in Hebrew means "the Lord remembers."

When we read in the Old Testament that the Lord remembers, it often means God takes particular note of someone, and cares for them, provides for them, saves them.

God remembers Noah, and the flood waters subsided. God remembers Abraham, and Lot is saved. God remembers Rachel, and she has a child. "Remember me," cries the psalmist, "and help me when you save your people."¹

Thus, the idea that "the Lord remembers" is a comforting one. In the history of Israel, the prophets note this over and over. God is angry, but God remembers God's love for Israel. God is impatient but God remembers God's prom-

ises and God is faithful. For God to remember signals that God doesn't forget us; God doesn't forget God's love and promises.

So when Zechariah is told he and Elizabeth will have a son, it is in some ways a fulfillment of Zechariah's name. God has remembered the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth. And in other ways, it is another affirmation of who God is and what God does: God remembers.

Remembering is important — and it's not just about thought and memories. To remember, to take time to reflect and to note that which is significant in our lives — over the past year, or past decade, etc. — is an important process, and I'm thankful this time of year provides an annual excuse to exercise that process.

Remembering is important to knowing who we are. Researchers who study identity point out that there is a false construct in our culture that we need *things* in order to establish an identity. But their research concludes that life is more than collecting things or activities. What we *need* is a *story*. We really only have an identity if we have a story.

Those same researchers note identity is constructed from the episodes and experiences that happen in our lives. Of course, we have experiences all the time. Each day is that. Right now is an experience. But for something to move into being an *event* in our lives, we have to have strong evaluation on and about it as we remember it; we have to stamp it with the conclusion that "that thing that happened" means something.²

That is a long, technical way of saying we have to actively ascribe meaning to the memory.

But research shows there's another step beyond remembering. We have to start narrating it. We have to *tell* the story of the event. So it isn't enough to know something happened. What cements it as part of our identity is when we start telling others about it.

One of the things we believe about God is that God is the one who remembers. God interacts and speaks, and in doing so, God identifies with us — with you. In that way, God is constantly identifying with all that happens.

In some ways, we believe God can't help but identify with us; can't help but tell us the story of us. Such a thing is a comfort, but it also isn't the conclusion.

The child's name is not to be Zechariah. And to those gathered together on the occasion of this religious ceremony of circumcision, any other name, any other suggestion, was offensive.

So when Elizabeth states that the name is to be John, an argument breaks out. Those gathered together — likely friends and family, possibly the neighbors and community — eventually turn to Zechariah, probably thinking he would surely vote with them and with the tradition. But instead, Zechariah, who hasn't been able to speak for the entirety of the pregnancy, writes, "His name is John." And in that moment, he can speak again.

In Hebrew, *John* means "Yahweh is gracious."

This story is about an angel delivering a name that will both

break and add to the tradition. Instead of a son whose name echoes once again that God remembers, the word from the angel — the word from God's messenger — is that yes, God remembers, *and* God is gracious. The Lord remembers, *and* Yahweh is gracious.

I think one of our fears about God — and one we see in the story when it says Zechariah is terrified at the sight of the angel — is that God will deal harshly with us. We know who we are. We know where we have fallen short. And the general feeling for some of us is that while God might forgive others, God might *not* forgive *us*. Forgive other people? Sure, but not me.

God cannot help but identify with you. God cannot help but be concerned for you. God remembers you. And God cannot help but have grace for you.

When we remember our own lives — when we look back to reflect on the events that have formed us in these past months and years, when we face those things which have been significant, and when we choose to narrate those events — I think we are called to do so with grace. We are to remember, yes. And just like God, we are to be gracious as we remember: gracious with ourselves — particularly when we have betrayed ourselves and inflicted pain on ourselves by what we have done; gracious with and toward others — particularly those who have perpetrated anger or pain with us. And that's where grace is not just a relief, but can also be scandalous, offensive.

The idea that we are to partner grace with our remembering, with our retelling — to suggest that grace must be part of the fabric of our identity — sounds good on paper, but can be deeply threatening in real life — because there are parts of our identity, sections of our story, where grace feels offensive.

I want to be clear: Grace doesn't mean we brush aside or let go of justice, or diminish the importance of significant things that happen to us in our lives.

The scandal of grace is that it is given not out of forgetting; it is not given out of ignorance; it is not given to let go of justice — but rather, grace is given in full light of remembrance.

Frankly, sometimes remembering is the easy part. It can be all too easy to remember and hang onto our own feelings of anger, pain or perhaps self-righteousness.

So I'm not surprised when Zechariah is told his son's name is to be John — told that the sentence "God remembers" literally begets "God is gracious" — that he can't quite believe it.

And so I'm also not surprised that Zechariah is basically made to do a lot of listening for the next nine months — and that it takes him that long to get to a place where he understands it. So I think it is OK if it takes me or you some time to deal with what grace might mean in the events of our lives.

But I also believe it was in fact Zechariah's decision, after all that listening, when he is asked what he wants to name his son and responds to the shock

of all those gathered — perhaps maybe to his own shock — that God is, in fact, gracious.

We are to remember, to hang on deeply, to those stories which make up who we are. As we allow those stories to work in our lives, we must also work — and work is exactly what it can feel like — toward applying grace to those stories.

We are to keep ourselves accountable to the events of this year — *and* be gracious! We are to keep others accountable to their own stories — *and* do so with grace!

Justice and joy require remembering. But it is grace that prevents perverting justice into revenge, and joy into selfish arrogance. In this way, justice and forgiveness are not opposites, but partners. Joy and grief are not opposites, but partners.

We will take Communion today. It is our tradition that we participate in Communion in our last worship service of the year, and it is a tradition I love. It is part of our story; part of our identity.

Communion is when we remember; where we identify ourselves as God's children — chosen, loved, forgiven, included. In our participation and our remembering, we cannot help but note the grace present in this meal — this meal where bread was broken with both friends and one who will betray. Where God in the flesh, the One who came to bring life and bring it abundantly, would be killed — and killed brutally.

Whatever stories you remember from this year, whatever

stories you claim as your own and keep yourself accountable to, whatever stories you tell, do so with grace. And when you tell those stories, remember the story of Zechariah and John: that God remembers, and God is gracious. Remember that God calls you by name, and chooses, invites you to sit at God's table and with each other.

When you tell those stories, first remembering and telling the story of this meal of grace — the story of this Communion — is not a bad place to start.

¹Psalm 106:4

²<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27760044?seq=1>

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.