

OUR PAST IS IN THE FUTURE

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It was this Sunday, the first Sunday of February, fifteen years ago, 1971, that I flew out from Springfield, Missouri where I was serving as campus pastor at Evangel college to preach the first sermon as the new pastor of the then Glad Tidings Assembly of God. We have since that time worshipped the Lord together in four different locations, been through one church merger and three name changes and that's not bad for flexibility on your part.

That first Sunday I came as pastor, I honestly don't remember the sermon that I preached. But then I don't remember a lot of sermons that I've preached. And I suspect that maybe you don't remember some of them either. But sermons are sort of like eating. We don't necessarily remember what we had to eat three weeks but it sure was good that we ate that week because we're in better shape as a result of it.

I do want to comment however on the sermon that I preached for the first time in the pulpit of the church, the candidating sermon. Which in preaching language I hear my colleagues talk about. A sugar-stick sermon. That is the sermon that you hold out and you know it's so good because you enjoy it so much that everybody can lick it and taste it and it's good. It's the sermon that you preach when you're a candidate. You only need one or two of those.

Always beware of voting for someone as pastor on the basis of one sermon or two because you don't know if there are any more sugar sticks left.

But I had my sugar stick sermon all ready. I was setting on the platform waiting to be introduced. I had my introduction going through my mind and my message. And I felt the Holy Spirit check me and say, "George, preach your memorized sermon." I have a message, which I will present this evening based upon the narrative of Jesus as told in the gospels. It had been a week or two since I had preached that sermon. You must keep it fresh in your memory in order to be able to give it. I immediately argued with the Lord on two counts. One is if I were able to get up there and give the sermon and was able to get through the whole thing without a hitch people would think I was trying to prove I was some sort of hot shot and impress them. Then secondly if I got in the middle of it somewhere and forgot where I was and went blank that would be a horrible debacle. So I kept telling the Holy Spirit No.

But as I sat there the impression came stronger and stronger. Finally when I was introduced as I was walking from the chair to the pulpit that I made up my mind. As I opened my mouth I simply began with these words. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God."

I started on through John 1. After a moment or two people felt I was reading my text for the day so they flipped to John 1. Then I was over in Luke 2 and people were looking there. After about 3 or 4 minutes people began wondering when is this guy going to get to his text. After about 10 minutes everybody sort of settled down. And we settled down together in the presence of the Lord.

When I was through I simply went back and sat down. I've had many occasions to reflect on that over the years. I think why the Holy Spirit had me do it was to anchor in my mind and

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perhaps in the church's mind as well that the only word which counts is God's word. And at the beginning, the very beginning of our time here, the Lord would be pleased that the ministry of this pulpit would be one which would be anchored in the word. For it is through the word of God that we come to know God. That we come to accept Jesus Christ as our savior. That we know how to live as Christians. That we're prepared and understand what it is to have eternal life. The blessings come out of his word.

In all these years it's been my privilege to share with you the word of God and to serve as your pastor.

Being around a long time can qualify you for a lot of things. I'm reminded that it can qualify you also to be placed in a museum. Where people come and look at you. But I don't want to yet be placed in a museum. I want to remain on a mission. So my attitude toward the past 15 years is what's past is prologue.

My text today is personal. Well get back to the gospel of Luke next Sunday morning. So often the scripture presents two sides to a truth. The first side of it seems to contradict the second side of it. But it's when we take them both together that we have wholeness.

The true scriptures that came to me are first from Philippians 2:12 and then 2 Peter 1:13. Paul says in Philippians "Forgetting what is behind," and Peter says in 2 Peter, "I think it is right to refresh your memory."

Here they are. On the one hand forget. On the other hand remember.

Forgetting. There are a lot of things you and I have forgotten and have forgotten them not of our own volition. It's just that we have too much information being processed into us and our minds are not like flypaper. Not everything sticks. So most of it goes out the window. Paul when he writes to the Philippians to tell them to forget is writing from the vantage point that he wants to forget both his past successes and his past failures. And past hurts. Those things will bog us down in the present and the future. If we go into the future with our past successes we'll enter with a spirit of haughtiness and pride and not be flexible enough if God wants to lead us in different directions. If we come into the future with a sense of failure we won't have the courage to go on and live as God wants us to. And if we're carrying the hurts from the past with us we will not be effective and clean instrument through whom the Lord can work and use us.

So there are many things to forget.

Some things I wish I could forget but I am unable to forget. There are reasons why the Lord would not have us forget some things in our life.

Let me touch on a couple of things especially that I cannot forget. There's a host of things and I hardly know where to begin. But I just kind of took off the wall two quick pictures of my mind's photographs.

One is a funny one, funny memory. When we were preparing to leave Springfield, Missouri to come out here at the time our family cars were a red Chevy and a four door Renault. I thought here this church in Newport Beach has called us and it would be not fitting that the pastor of that church should arrive in an old red Chevrolet and a little Renault. I need a bigger car. How will

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they hear unless the pastor drives a Cadillac? So I looked in the used pages. My salary could not really afford this but my pride could take it in. I found for sale one day what I seemed to think was a beautiful used car. I went down and it was a dreamboat. It was a black and red El Dorado Cadillac, 1965. Six years old, 18,000 miles and it was a dreamboat. It was a block long and it looked like it had never been taken out of the showroom. It was immaculate. I went into debt, got it and drove it out here. Pulled into the church parking lot with my block long car.

Over the next number of months that car just about sunk us. It drank more oil than it did gasoline. And I had it into the repair shop all the time. Howie who is now with the Lord and who had a garage said to me, "We had been praying when you were in the process of coming and felt that you needed a new car. We were going to give you our Mercury Cougar. But then when we saw you drive out with the Cadillac we thought the Lord had provided for your need." Boy, did I kick myself over that!

But it carried a lot of lessons. Two of these basically were don't ever get ahead of the Lord and try to force something on your own. And number two, material things never impress anybody so don't try to do anything like that. Not that there's anything wrong with driving a nice car. But it was my motive for driving that particular car that was so bad at that time.

I remember on the heavy side. The little girl that came to the church as a teenager who was in a very troubled situation in her home. Her parents were separated. One day we got the call to go over to her home. On arriving we found she had been alone with her grandmother who was a lovely Christian woman. The little girl had been so depressed and while her mother was at work, she took some of her own bedding and fashioned a noose and hung herself. I'll never forget the funeral. It was one of the first I did as pastor. At the graveside when all had been said I watched as the American family left. I saw the older sister walk away on someone else's arm and get into her car. I saw the mother walk away on the arm of her boyfriend and get into her car. And I saw the husband walk away on the arm of his girlfriend and get into his car. That family at death was going four different directions. One into the ground and three opposite ways. That explained to me why what had happened to the little girl had happened. There was nothing to hold it together. There was no shoulder to cry on in that family, even in the presence of death. They each had to bear the load alone.

I've been praying ever since that God would somehow help us as a church to strengthen family life. There is great pressure on family life, great pressure to dissolve marriages and great hurts within family relationships. But I surely never want to face a scene like that again in my life. God has called us to love one another and called us to reconciliation. And called us to put one another first. Called us to the peace which Christ alone can bring which can provide the healing that our families need. I can't forget that.

There are a lot of things I remember. And Peter talks about remembering things. There are some good things I remember. I remember first of all these joyous years, which began at God's initiative and have continued because of his grace. They really did begin at God's initiative because before the church ever went looking for a pastoral candidate they spent the first four days of their search as a church in fasting and prayer. On our end as well, unbeknownst to the church I had a similar period of four days of fasting and prayer in which the Lord confirmed on both sides his will in our lives. Everything that has happened over the years that has been good has been because of his grace.

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A second thing I remember in a wholesome sense is the fact that we prayed that God would give us a heterogeneous church. That simply means a church where we are different from one another; not all of us are alike. We prayed that God would give us a church where there were young and old people. In those early days there were very few elderly people in the church. The old man on the board was 35. We prayed for a church that included more people than had grown up in the Assemblies of God. We prayed that God would give us an experience of seeing people from non-church backgrounds and all kinds of denominations find that we have a common unity in Christ Jesus, the Lord. And that we can lay aside some of the differences which had divided Christians from Christians. We would live at ease with whatever differences in liturgy or denominational backgrounds or expectations that we came from. We prayed that God would give us every strata of society as a representation in this church to prove that the church is not some social club. But that it's existence can only be attributed to its loyalty to Jesus Christ. And what we have in Christ is greater than any differences we possess. How I rejoice that God in so many ways is answering these prayers. They've not all been answered yet but gradually as the years have come and gone we have seen more and more of this divergence coming into the body of Christ expressing itself in this congregation in unity.

I shall never forget my son George Paul at about 7 or 8 years of age when we were in the sanctuary on 22nd street, I had been talking of this very theme of a heterogeneous church. George had been listening with all ears. He came to me one day and said, "I've got it!" to understand what he'd "got" you have to know that for him the best seats in the house at that age were in the church balcony. He said, "Let's call the church balcony the KG balcony." I searched my mind for what possibly K and G could stand for. I could not think of anything. I said, "What does the KG balcony stand for?" He said, "It stands for all the Catholics and the Jews so they will have the best seats in the house."

Then I remember our mission as a church. We're still striving toward it because our work will never be done. In the earliest days and we repeated this on a number of occasions in intervening years. We phoned all the churches Protestant and Catholic in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa and asked each one two questions: How many people can you seat in your sanctuary? How many people are in those seats on an average Sunday morning? We took all the totals, compared them to the population totals (and the figures have not varied over the years) and discovered that on any given Sunday 77% of the people who live in Newport Beach and Costa Mesa are not in a church in those two towns. 77%. I'm sure that would hold true elsewhere. That gave us a sense that we had a mission to our community and that we must never measure success by how many are inside but it's always how many yet remain to be reached. Our task will never be done. God has called us to bear witness to him in this community in which we live.

The Challenger experience this week has taught us all again that life is but a breath and we all drive chariots of fire. The explosion of life can happen to us at any moment. The most fundamental mission the church has is certainly not to make people comfortable. Nor is it necessarily to provide fellowship although it does that. Our most important mission is to declare Jesus Christ and in him is our hope alone of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We must make that our passion and our utmost priority within the neighborhoods and communities in which we live.

A fourth thing, which I look back with fond remembrance, is that we have prayed to be a balanced church. And by balanced I simply mean a church a church that's not carried away by every wind of doctrine or new fad or cleaving to personalities. Therefore you will not find some

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extremes of emphasis in this church you will find both for example an emphasis on divine healing and yet also an emphasis upon the fact that faith has two coins – one is the active side where God changes our circumstances and the other is the side when God is not changing our circumstances or healing us he's giving us the strength to go through it. We've sought to maintain balance in that in so many different areas in a day and era when the body of Christ on every hand is being tempted to be pulled out of balance.

Sometimes, as you well know, the middle of the teeter-totter is not the most exciting place to be. It's the place where there is balance. But the ends are a lot more fun because you get to swing high up into the air or bang much on the bottom. But we have preferred to stay somewhat in the center on issues that effect the scripture and effect the life of God's people. And with God's help we will stay there. We desire to promote healthy, biblical, Christ centered living. The only way to do that is to stress the balanced life which Christ brings in our hearts.

It's been pointed out that in the early church when they first selected leaders they chose men who "Were of good reputation full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Even in the early church which was Pentecostal or charismatic when they were getting ready to call out leaders they already factually knew not every Christian had a good reputation. That's why their leaders especially had to be people of good reputation. They knew that not every spirit filled Christian had wisdom. And they knew that not every Christian really was possessed with God's Spirit in a dynamic way. And therefore those special qualifications were made. My prayer is that as a church collectively, as well as individually, we may express those traits of being of good reputation in the community in which we live and being full of the Spirit and of wisdom.

Then a fifth thing that I'm reminded of is that we want to see every believer in this body as a minister. The ministry staff of this church is not the people that you see on the back of the bulletin. That's the pastoral staff. But you are the ministers. Ephesians 4:11-12 tells us that every believer is a minister. I have a dream for the new church facility when it is constructed. If I can get my way with the decorating committed and all the powers that be I want to make sure that the foyer is large enough. I want to have one whole wall of the foyer adorned with the pictures, the photographs, names, and titles of every one in our church body who is identified with any ministry either inside the body or from the body to the world. I want to have a big sign over all those photographs that says "The ministerial staff of Newport-Mesa Christian center." When the visitor walks in they'll say, This church has a large staff. He's going to see hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of names.

We just did a count for our annual church counsel. He discovered that we already have over 700 people plugged in to at least one ministry within the church as a volunteer that we can identify. We give God thanks for that. We need to stay away from the personality complex and the pastor complex. When the time comes for God to call me away or call me home I will be keenly grieved and disappointed if any of your relationship to this church has been contingent upon whether or not I'm the pastor. We're the body of Christ together. And as John Wesley so eloquently said, "God buries his workmen but not his work." He desires not to promote a personality. The only personality that God is interested in promoting is the personality of Jesus Christ.

Then I remember and give thanks that we are a church who has sought to fulfill the great commission. Jesus said, Go into all the world. This church has had a large heart. Not only for its own and those nearby. But it's had a large heart for the world. I pray that will continue.

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We're so blessed and we have so much. We have young people to send. We have a country with the political freedom and basis that allows us to send them and funds to send. We therefore can be involved in the great commission everywhere.

A seventh thing for which I'm grateful and which I remember is that God has called us to be a church and not a theater. A theater is where we all just come from our separate homes and apartments and take a seat and when the service is over we go our own way and don't connect with one another. But God has called us to be family to one another. That this church has increasingly become.

I have a wide family now because not only those whom God has called now to be within the church but there are so many for various reasons God has led them to various reasons to other locations.

I had a delightful experience a couple of Sunday nights ago. After the service I saw someone I thought I knew but I was surprised to see them because she and her husband are ministers of music at another church about an hour's drive. They were in this church fifteen years ago and for the last 12-13 have been away in ministry that God has called them to. I looked at her, "Aren't you Cheryl Miller?" She said yes. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at your church on Sunday night." She said, "I know but I wanted my daughter to meet you and she wanted to meet you." She introduced me to her twelve, going on thirteen that week, year old daughter Sharon. She said the reason why she wants to meet you is because she has a letter that you wrote to her when you dedicated her 13 years ago. You gave instructions that that letter was to remain sealed until her thirteenth birthday. Then she was to open it. She wanted to meet the pastor that had sent her that letter and dedicated her.

Of course I knew what was in the letter because I try to do it for every baby that I've dedicated over the years. It's simply a letter saying, "On this day your parents brought you before the congregation and before God and dedicated you to the Lord and pledged themselves to raise you in the Christian way of life. During these years they've been praying for you and we've been praying for you that you would come to know Christ. We trust that by the time you've come to the age of 13 you'll already have given your life to Jesus Christ. But if you have not would you do it today as you begin your teenage years. Would you personally invite Jesus into your life?"

I felt that that was kind of long-range evangelism. But I had never met any one who had opened one of those letter. I didn't do it the first year I was here but began shortly afterwards. Now here was the first young child grown up to get into her teenage years who was opening their letter. I was thrilled and grateful for them to come and share that with me. It reminded me of all the letters I've sent and the joy I'm going to have now in the next 15-20 years seeing all those letters open. And beginning to dedicate the children of the children that I've dedicated. That's exciting.

Paul says to the Philippian Christians "I hold you in my heart." Since that was the day before they invented cameras he had to think of something that was a photograph in his heart.

That's the way I feel towards you. I hold you in my heart. Close relationships take time to grow but they're good. God has put us in a very special place. He's put us at the gate of our city, at the entrance place to this community. He wants us in the years ahead to be a witness for him.

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Our time is really just beginning. There are so many people yet to be reached with the gospel. What kind of church we are going to be in the future is greatly dependent on where we've been in the past? That's why I've simply titled this little message today, "Our Past is in the Future." On the 15th anniversary I'm not going to stand before you that I'm suddenly going to change and the church is going to go a whole new direction or we have some new revelation or vision that's going to kick us into a different orbit. I see life as kind of a normative growth, like a child or a tree. We're just going to keep growing in the directions that God has given us already and flexible enough to feel those correcting moments that the spirit may bring in our direction.

In the earlier days of my pastorate there was a gentleman whom I do not know, whom I have only met a couple of times. Both of which times he was in the congregation, an interval of several years between. On both occasions he handed me a prophecy that he had written. I sensed him to be a real man of God and I received what he had said and received it into my soul. I kept what he had written for many years in a file then somehow I misplaced it. I looked for several years. It was gone and I could not locate it. One day while cleaning the credenza in my office I discovered it jammed behind some desk drawers. That's why I could not locate it. In the meantime there had been a vial of anointing oil that had broken in the desk and spilled oil all over this file. I keep this file now in a place that is very near to me so I can have constant reference to the fact that it's there. I call it the Anointed File. And the Anointed Prophecy.

There are three things in situ. Two prophetic words and then a letter that I had sent on June 19, 1972 to the president of southern California college. At that time this church was worshipping near Hoag Hospital. I suggested to him that it would be a marvelous idea that the college let this church come and locate on the corner of Newport Boulevard and Fair Drive. That was a funny proposition at that time. But four requests and ten years later we did it.

This prophecy said, "Truly, truly I say unto you, my children, these are not days for faint hearts and weakened knees. But to the contrary. These are days of strong hearts and firm knees, strengthened in the power of my Spirit. For my hand is upon this house and as I speak before loosen thy pegs and lengthen thy ropes for the days of thy increase are almost upon thee. I will send a surge of people towards thy doors as a mighty wave toward the shore. If thy walls are unyielding and thy ropes stretched taunt how shall they enter and where shall they go? Look unto me and I will give thee firmness of faith and thou shalt stand as surely as the Lord thy God stand in thy midst."

"I will send a surge of people." That's a little bit frightening if you want a small church isn't it? If you want close relationships. But if we're a book of Acts kind of church, we will see all those close relationships continue as the surge of people come. For God wants the whole world to know. And he wants the whole community to know that Jesus Christ is Lord. We shall never judge our success by how many are inside but how many are yet to be reached.

I've felt that prophecy when it first came was to be fulfilled instantly. I've come to understand now that it is progressive. It is unfolding. And that the surge is coming.

Father, I thank you for these moments we've shared today. I thank you for these years you've given us together. I thank you for the Holy Spirit who is faithful to our hearts and brings us needed correction in our life when we err from your path. I thank you, Jesus, for your presence. For the high privilege you've given to us for being yolk fellows together, brothers and sisters in a family that was begun through you in your life, in your cross and in

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your resurrection. Of all the privileges in life this is the greatest privilege to know you and then to have the joy of fellowship and friendship with your people. May we as a church family unceasingly bring praise and honor and glory to your name. And shine for you in this area of which you have called us to. May you, Lord, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this church fellowship reach those who are lost, those who are hurting, to see who need the helping hand of the Lord. Give us strength for every task we pray in the Lord's name. Amen.