



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
 Knoxville, TN  
 July 7, 2024  
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
 Sermon: "Forgetting Former Things?"

## **2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 (NRSV)**

5:1 Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh.

5:2 For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel."

5:3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

5:4 David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years.

5:5 At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

5:9 David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward.

5:10 And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.

## **Forgetting Former Things?**

The picture on the front of the bulletin is a recent one of Oak Park in Montgomery, AL – the oldest park in that city. It looks like a 4<sup>th</sup> of July cookout. Crowds gather under the picnic shelter. Men stand around a smoking grill – as we do best. One seems either to be throwing or catching a football. It looks like a good time.

I found the picture attached to a local news story, entitled, "Oak Park, Forgotten Paradise, Gets Chance at a New Life."

You see, Oak Park was once famous for its enormous public swimming pool. In the 1940s and 50s, hundreds of thousands of excited residents came to Oak Park every summer to swim. The pool was legendary. There's a picture of it on the city's website.<sup>1</sup> It's bigger than anything you'll come across in Knoxville. Beside it there was a zoo and a community center. It was the center of a bustling city. It was the place you wanted to be on a hot summer day.

That party came to an end in 1959. You can probably guess why.

A historical monument at the Park's entrance today says simply that "a Federal Court [found] city recreational policies to be unconstitutional." That's a euphemism, at best, for saying the pool closed because Montgomery city leaders refused to integrate it with the city's Black residents.

Instead, city leaders chose to fill in and bury their famous pool in Oak Park, this once grand monument, this one-time gathering place for the city's people. The same thing happened to hundreds of public pools across the American South. In Oak Park, the zoo closed. The animals were sold off.

Heather McGhee, in her book *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, writes about visiting Oak Park in the summer of 2019.<sup>2</sup> She says it was nearly deserted. She asked a park official where the pool used to be. No one could remember.

This is what racism does, she says. It hurts black and white communities alike. It destroys what we have in common. It isolates us. So much so, that there's this separation between us, between our communities. Just look at East and West Knoxville. Do you think that separation is an accident?

But so often rather than face it, we forget such painful histories and the reasons why we are separated. We forget why, in our neighborhoods and our churches and our swimming pools, everyone looks the same. Do you ever stop and think why these places look like they do?

"Oak Park, Forgotten Paradise," is how the paper put it. Painful histories, are likely to be forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.montgomerybotanicalgardens.com/about/>

<sup>2</sup> Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021), 25-26.

We do it in the church, too, all the time. We forget; we ignore that which is painful. In fact, we're doing it today, in our lectionary text this week. You'll remember, the lectionary is where we get our Biblical text every week.

Look at it today:

2 Samuel, ch 5, verses 1-5, and 9 & 10. It's a beautiful passage. It's David, the shepherd king.

"[David]...shall be shepherd of my people Israel," verse 2.

In the Bible, the shepherd is the one who protects the flock.

"The Lord is my shepherd," says the Psalmist, "I shall not want." Psalm 23, "A Psalm of David."

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus, a descendent of David, in the Gospel of John.

The shepherd cares for the people; he protects them.

David is a shepherd king, in our passage today.

Notice, he does not conquer in order to rule.

The elders come to anoint him by their own choosing.

And then, to unite north and south, Israel and Judea, David chooses for his seat of power, not his stronghold Hebron in the south, where his power is already consolidated, but Jerusalem. Jerusalem! The City of David, right in-between the north and the south, uniting what up to that point had been divided.

Everyone remembers David, the shepherd king.

Everyone remembers Jerusalem, the City of David.

You've noticed by now, that the lectionary passage leaves out verses 6, 7, and 8. To be honest, these are the type of verses, well, you'd rather forget. We'd all like to forget that Jerusalem, belonged to someone else before David.

*The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, "You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back"—thinking, "David cannot come in here." Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. David had said on that day, "Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water*

*shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.” Therefore it is said, “The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.”*

These are confusing verses. What they boil down to, is that David heard a taunt from the Jebusites: That even those without sight or the ability to walk would stop his attack. So David, when he conquered Jerusalem, made sure to show no mercy, especially to those without sight or the ability to walk. The text says the blind and the lame are “*those whom David hates.*”

One might say, the lectionary did us a favor, leaving out these verses. It’s a painful history you’d rather forget.

Everyone remembers David, the shepherd king, and his city Jerusalem. We’d rather forget David, the conqueror; this David without mercy.

By now, you may be asking yourself: so, why is he reading verses 6, 7, and 8 today? We don’t have to. The lectionary even says we shouldn’t. For that matter, why even bring up Oak Park, and it’s swimming pool, buried a generation ago? Why be such a downer on Sunday morning, Richard? And a holiday weekend at that?

One thing I have learned, in my 11 months at this church: Westminster has never been the type of community to run away from hard conversations. And we read these verses, especially on this day, because at the same time, outside of these walls, forgetfulness is in fashion these days.

Everywhere you look, we’re forgetting or we are ignoring:

Painful histories in this country.

Painful histories of the (capital C) Church.<sup>3</sup>

Just last month, the state of Louisiana mandated the Ten Commandments be posted in every classroom in the state, and Oklahoma ordered the Bible be taught in its public schools.

We’re forgetting the separation of church and state.

We’re forgetting that our founders, many of them Christians themselves, set up this separation.

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<sup>3</sup> I’m indebted to Peace Presbyterian Fellowship’s commentary on this passage for helping me make this connection. See PPF LITURGICAL RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY, JULY 4, 2021, <https://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/resources/ppf-liturgical-resources-for-sunday-july-4-2021/>

We're forgetting that that separation is necessary, because people calling themselves Christians, have a long history of excluding and erasing those of other faiths or those who believe differently than us.

As a Christian, I wish the values of our faith showed up more often in the public sphere: values like charity, love, justice, and humility. But instead of our values, you see the symbols of our faith, used to squash over others' rights and make those who believe differently feel like they are less than.

And on the national stage, there's a similar forgetfulness:

Voting rights act, reproductive justice, environmental protections, the checks and balances on executive power, each of them dismantled.

We see our leaders erasing these protections, forgetting there is a long and difficult history where such rights were trampled over, acting as if such protections are no longer necessary.

Forgetfulness seems to be in fashion these days.

This week I came across a quote from James Baldwin. It's a quote from a 1962 editorial in the *New York Times*.<sup>4</sup> It says:

*Not Everyone that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

In the editorial, Baldwin is discussing the role of writers in his day, in the midst of the Civil Rights struggle.

*In my mind, he says, the effort to become a great [writer] simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.*

I read that this week, and thought, that right there is the mission of well the church, today, in 2024. In a season of forgetting, that is exactly what God is calling us to, as a people of faith:

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<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear." *The New York Times*. January 14, 1962. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1962/01/14/118438007.html>. I found the initial quote originally in an editorial published this week: Michelle Goldberg, "There's No Reason to Resign Ourselves to Biden." *The New York Times*. July 1, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/01/opinion/biden-replacement-white-house.html>.

*To tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.*

Because *nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

God calls us to tell the truth.

God calls communities, even and especially those who face their difficult histories.

Just look at David and Jerusalem:

Even with their difficult histories, God doesn't give up on David or Jerusalem. In fact, they become two of the most beautiful and brilliant symbols of redemption found throughout Scripture.

Whereas David conquered Jerusalem without mercy, by the grace of God, his name and his city become symbols, not just of mercy, but of most radical inclusion imaginable:

Isaiah, chapter 65, God says, "For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight...They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

Matthew, chapter 21, when Jesus enters the Jerusalem temple, "The blind and the lame came to him in the temple," and the children cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David."

And at very end of Revelation, in the final prophesy recorded in our Scriptures, there is "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven...And...a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'"

You see, a difficult history does mean God is through with us.

A painful past does not mean God has no use us.

In fact, throughout Scripture, it's not the perfect and proud; it is instead, the real and complicated, those with all their pain and stories, both beautiful and tragic, who partner with God in the work of justice and redemption. That justice and that redemption does not come by erasing the past or ignoring injustice. It comes, rather, in remembering.

- Remembering those pushed to the margins.
- Confessing the times we were on the wrong side of history.

- Partnering with those, who are told they are less than.
  - You see it throughout the Hebrew Prophets. You see it throughout the ministry of Jesus.

And so, yes, today we don't ignore 2 Samuel, ch. 5, verses 6, 7, and 8.

We read them.

We reckon with them.

We point out the times our Scriptures fall short.

We read such verses beside other texts of love and justice.

Because Westminster has never been the type of place to avoid hard discussions.

And, likewise, a few days after our national holiday,

We look at the full history of this nation.

We celebrate it.

We reckon with it.

In all its beauty. In all its tragedy. In all its challenges.

Siblings in Christ, it looks like we have some difficult days ahead of us as a nation.

So, this is what we are going to do.

As a church, we will keep telling the truth,

We will reckon with our past.

And we will face what is to come.

This is not just the challenge of our times.

In fact, it is a gift.

It is our way forward.

In a difficult time, it is the way God calls us forward.

As a people of faith, we don't forget.

We remember.

And for that, we say, thanks be to God.