

Luke 4:1-3

Deuteronomy 8:1-20

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Good Stewards of God's Grace: REMEMBER AND BELIEVE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One day God was approached by a group of scientists who said, "Listen, God, we've decided we don't need you anymore. These days we can clone people, transplant organs, and do all sorts of things that used to be considered miraculous."

God replied, "Don't need me, huh? How about we put your theory to the test. Why don't we have a competition to see who can make a human being, say, a male human being."

The scientists eagerly agreed, so God declared they should do it like he did in the good ole days when he created Adam.

"Fine," said the scientists, and they bent down to scoop up some dirt.

"Whoa!" said God, shaking his head in disapproval. "Not so fast. You get your own dirt!"

And Moses said, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

In July 2012, when he was running for re-election, President Obama made some remarks at a campaign appearance in Virginia that caused quite a controversy. The two sentences that were quoted and stirred things up were, "If you've got a business — you didn't build that. Somebody else made it happen." Of course, those are only two sentences out of an entire address in which he went on to say, "The point is, when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. You're not on your own, we're in this together."¹

I wonder what kind of press coverage Moses got after he gave his speech to the Israelites! Listen again to what he tells them as they stand by the Jordan River and get ready to cross over into the Promised Land: "When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17)

As someone said just the other day, Moses' warning to God's people sounds a lot like Jesus' parable about the rich fool. Listen to the parable according to *The Message*:

Speaking to the people, [Jesus] went on, "Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."

Then he told them this story: “The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’ Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’ Just then God showed up and said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods — who gets it?’ That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”

I don’t have any scientific data to back up what I’m about to say — just anecdotal observations gathered over the years. And, by the way, I’m quick to include myself in this description of our attitudes and reactions to things that happen in life. Often when bad things happen to us in life, we’re quick to cry out to the Lord, “Why me, O God? Why did this have to happen?” or “Why did you let this happen to me, God?” or even “Why did you make this happen to me, God?”

When something really good, a wonderful blessing, comes our way, though, are we just as quick to cry out, “Why me, O God? Why did this have to happen?” or “Why did you let this good thing happen to me, God?” or even “Why did you make this good thing happen to me, God?” Maybe not!

Considering what Moses had to say to God’s people that day by the side of the Jordan River, our human nature and tendencies don’t seem to have changed much over the years. In the first part of his speech, Moses reminds the people of their years of wandering in the wilderness and how God provided for them all along the way. However, if you read the story of the wilderness wanderings in the book of Exodus, you find out that only three days into their journey, the people are already complaining against Moses and God, and saying, “What shall we drink?” About six weeks later, the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and said, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” And Moses said to the people, “Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.” (Exodus 15:24; 16:2-3, 8)

“Remember!” Moses told the people of God. “Remember and believe!” Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness . . . by feeding you with manna . . . in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. “Remember!” Moses told the people of God. “Remember and do not forget!”

Two weeks ago, we gathered around the Lord’s Table for the Sacrament of Holy Communion by the lake at Camp Kirkwood. When it came time for me to break the bread and lift the cup, I said some different words I had come across in my worship planning. If you were there that morning, you might remember:

When I broke the loaf of bread, I said, “Take, eat, remember, and believe that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was given for the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Take, eat, remember, and believe that the body of Christ is the bread of heaven for us.”

When I lifted the cup and poured the juice, I said, “Take, drink, remember, and believe that the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was given for the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Take, drink, remember, and believe that the blood of Christ is the cup of our salvation.”

Remember! Remember and believe! Remember and trust! Remembering the past — especially remembering what God has done for us when we **couldn't** do anything for ourselves, such as sending his Son to die for our sins and make things right between us and God — remembering the past helps us put the present into perspective. Remembering the past — especially remembering what God has done in our lives — helps us discover who is the source of all good things. Remembering the past — especially remembering how God has loved us and guided us and provided for us — can help us trust God for the present and the future. Again and again in his speech, Moses encourages God's people, “Remember the Lord your God! Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God!”

In another wilderness place, Jesus was tempted to forget the Lord God. After forty days, he must have been hungry. When the devil said, “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread,” Jesus must have been tempted to do just that. But Jesus remembered and quoted from our Deuteronomy story: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Jesus could have commanded the stone to become a loaf of bread, but the temptation before him was much greater than satisfying a rumbling stomach. He didn't just remember some Bible verses he had learned as a young boy at the synagogue or from Mary and Joseph. Jesus remembered the core of his identity as a child of God and he relied on God for everything.

The two wilderness stories are almost the same story:

* Israel, the child of God, wanders in the wilderness for forty years and is dependent on God and is tempted not to trust God for what they need.

* Jesus, the Son of God, wanders in the wilderness for forty days and is dependent on God and is tempted not to trust God for what he needs.

Israel and Jesus both faced the temptation of mistrust. When we forget what God has done and what God has promised to do, the questions start to creep in and determine how we live and what we do: What if we go hungry? What if we don't have enough? How do we know God is trustworthy to do what he says he's going to do?

Therein lies the danger of living out of a fear or sense of scarcity. What if we don't have enough? becomes the controlling idea and shaper of how we use what God has given us to do what God has called us to do, of our very lives and our mission and ministry.

Of course, it's a two-sided coin. Ironically, according to Moses, the flip-side has to do with our wealth and blessings. It's as if our two choices are either “What if we don't have enough?” and “Look what my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me.” To choose either option in life is to betray our trust in the Lord our God,

who has led us all these years, who has redeemed us from our sins through Jesus Christ, who blesses us and gives us gifts to do what he calls us to do as his people.

Last Sunday after worship, Nancy and I ate lunch with some good friends who visited our church and worshiped with us. As we ate, Bill and Sylvia asked about our children. I told them about Jackson being a furniture designer in New York City and shared a story Jackson had told us recently. He was on the phone with a representative of a leather company that does some work for the company Jackson works for. The leather company representative said to Jackson, “Let me tell you about the project we’re working on. You won’t believe it!” He then went on to tell Jackson that they were supplying the leather for some leather panels that are going to line the walls of the library of the luxury condominium of a very well-known person in New York City. The leather company guy asked Jackson, “Guess how much the leather — just the leather! — is going to cost, not including the design and installation?” Jackson said he guessed in the tens of thousands of dollars. The leather guy said, “No, \$15 million!”

The four of us sat at the lunch table and gawked in amazement at that figure. Then we began to talk about that kind of wealth, until I felt compelled to put it in perspective for all of us. “You know,” I said, “I don’t think I’ll ever have \$15 million to spend on leather panels in my library, but I’ve met plenty of people in other places in this world who would look at the way I live and what I have and wonder what it would be like to live like that.”

I don’t want \$15 million leather panels on the walls in my house. But I don’t want to look at someone who can do that and complain, “God, why can’t I be like that?” On the other hand, I don’t want to look at what I’ve got and think, “Look at what I’ve done on my own.”

No, as we prayed together in our Prayer of Confession, I want us all to long to be faithful stewards of God’s abundant grace, to long to serve each other in love and humility, to serve God’s world with wisdom and energy, to trust that God’s abundant grace is strong and eternal.

I want us to remember and believe that God alone is the source of our life and all good things, so we will know how to live and always be good stewards of God’s grace.

Let us pray: We praise you, O God, from whom all blessings flow. Lord, you gave us your most precious and holy gift, Jesus Christ. Thank you for your Son and his Church. Thank you for your enduring love, your limitless mercy, and your amazing grace. Help us to move forward in faith, so we may grow in love and generosity. Open our hearts and minds as we seek your will for our church, our community, and ourselves. Challenge and inspire us to use the gifts we have received to serve others. In your holy name we pray. Amen.