

Freedom from Memory – Isaiah 65:17-25

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So, baseball is done for the year. The Dodgers won the World Series for the second year in a row. They're really the hot franchise now in professional baseball.

The Boston Red Sox have won nine World Series titles in their history, tied for the third most all-time. And they've played in 13 World Series. They are one of baseball's most iconic franchises.

Since 2004, they've won four titles. So, for the last two decades, any Red Sox fan pretty much has good memories. In fact, any YOUNG Red Sox fan today, say younger than twenty-one years old, has only known sustained success from their favorite team.

One of the narratives of the team's history, however, doesn't get talked about as much anymore. Before 2004, it was talked about all the time. In fact, it hovered over every Red Sox fan every season like a heavy weight that got heavier and heavier. Before the Sox won the World Series that year, they hadn't won a title in 86 years!

It was as central to baseball's narrative as anything in the game. The Sox just couldn't get it done. Eight decades and counting, and the team would come up short every year.

They called the drought the "Curse of the Bambino" after the Red Sox' famous sale of star player Babe Ruth to the rival New York Yankees two years after their World Series championship in 1918.

It seemed like the curse would never be broken. Memories of the Red Sox coming up short year after year infiltrated the minds and hearts of die-hard fans.

But then came 2004. A miracle-like comeback against the rival Yankees in the American League Championship Series sent them to the World Series. And they swept the St. Louis Cardinals to finally end their nearly nine-decade title drought.

If you ask a Sox fan today who's in his or her fifties or sixties what memories permeate their fandom, they could very well include the Curse of the Bambino in their personal narrative. But with the Red Sox having won more titles in the 21st century than any other team, their memories in the last two decades have clearly shifted. Now, the images of their heroes raising championship trophies into the air are what dominates their collective memories. They now have freedom from the memories of their 86-year-old winless streak.

One of the best things we have as human beings can be our memories. Memories of fun times in our youth, memories of first-dates with your spouse, memories of raising our kids when they were young, memories of fun times with friends at events or on vacation.

Good memories can sustain us in tough times.

But painful memories can also shackle us. They can restrain us and keep us from prospering in the present and into the future.

Red Sox fans had been shackled with the pain of not winning a title in almost a hundred years. But their recent success has released them from their memories of consistent disappointment.

God said to the people of Judah here in Isaiah 65, “Look! I’m creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won’t be remembered.”

What were these past events for them?

Well, they were painful. There was the terror of the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, their forcible dislocation from their homeland, and perhaps even Judah’s own sinfulness (65:1-7).

Judah had been under threat from the very earliest cultural memories preserved in biblical tradition. Enslavement in Egypt, living under the shadow of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, Judah had often struggled on the brink of extinction.

We would forgive them if all that history dominated their memories. It was a lot—a lot of bad stuff.

But God said to them that all this should no longer be considered, for God would create “a new heaven and a new earth.” This promise reconfigured everything that Judah had known about its life and its identity.

The city of Jerusalem would be the living proof that God loved God’s chosen city. And the same with its inhabitants: “I will be glad about my people. No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in [the city] again.”

Nor will there be babies dying, God said, or adults dying early. There will be prosperity in this land. Its inhabitants won’t labor in vain nor bear children to a world of horrors. Wolves and lambs will graze together. And nobody will hurt or destroy at any place on the mountain.

“Past events won’t be remembered. They won’t come to mind.”

That was God's promise to the people of Judah. And in the same vain, it's God's promise to God's people today. The promise of a new heaven and a new earth will so take the place of what's here that our painful memories of the old will fade. The memories of the old, filled with challenge and suffering and inequality and loneliness and loss won't be remembered. To be replaced with the reality of a just and prosperous world.

We long for this place of unending reconciliation and joy.

That belief in this new heaven and new earth that God is creating, this longing for promised reconciliation and unending joy is our hope.

There are so many worthy definitions of hope. Henri Nowen said, "Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness."

Jim Wallis said, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."

God through Isaiah basically told the people of Judah just that: Forgetting our memories of the past happens when the evidence starts to change—a new heaven and a new earth.

The temptation is to believe that what God is talking about here is just what we will find at the time of our deaths—everlasting life due to Jesus' triumph over death through his resurrection.

Yet, God didn't promise just a "new heaven." Instead, he talked about that in tandem with a "new earth." It's the promise of a new beginning here in this created world authored by God.

The author N.T. Wright reflected on this: *Brought up to go to church, to sing the hymns and say the prayers, I knew the story. "On the third day he rose again" and all that. But the sermons I heard and most of the hymns we sang around Eastertime were not actually about*

resurrection itself. They were about “going to heaven.” We assumed that talking about Jesus’s resurrection was simply vivid picture language for saying that he was now “alive,” and that this meant that we, his followers, would “go to heaven,” to be with him in the end. ...

End of story.

Except that it isn’t. The last scene in the Bible isn’t about “saved souls” going up to heaven. It is about the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth as the centerpiece of the “new heaven and new earth” promised by the prophets and reaffirmed by Jesus himself and his first followers.

In other words, you can’t have a new heaven without a new earth. Resurrection is about both.

God’s promise to Judah was stated in incarnational language, earthy language. It was about people living long lives, building houses, planting vineyards, and eating fruit. It was about people making use of their handiwork and not laboring in vain. It was about their children being blessed by the Lord.

It was about the restoration of God’s creation, including the welfare of God’s people.

If, regarding hope, we’re waiting for the evidence to change, what do we do in the meantime?

Well, we work. We work as God’s agents to bring in the evidence of renewal. Serving our neighbors, advocating for the poor and marginalized, working for the welfare of all God’s children. When we do this, the evidence starts to turn. And the memories of painful pasts start to recede.

It’s hope in action. And we become then more easily able to be freed from the painful memories of our past.

We’re all here today for a host of reasons, namely the inherent belief we have in a God who can and is making all things

new. New things around the world, new things in our country, new things in our community, new things in our congregation, and new things in our personal lives.

We see all the challenges, in many cases we're overwhelmed with the pictures of them. Yet we gather here because we believe the God of all new things is working to bring in newness of life. And over time, the memories of our struggle start to become fuzzier. And soon, they'll be forgotten.