

“2020 HINDSIGHT”
2 Samuel 12:7-15; 1 Chronicles 29:26-28
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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I trust that we’ve all used the expression, “Hindsight is 20/20.” What we mean is that we don’t always see our life experiences clearly at the time they happen; we understand them better in retrospect. When you and I take a fresh look back at the past, we may feel gratitude for blessings we overlooked in the original moment, or we may feel regret about our mistaken choices and missed opportunities. Either way, if we had known then what we know now, we might have done things differently. Foresight is often faulty, but hindsight is 20/20.

However, let’s examine this familiar expression more carefully. “Hindsight” means thinking about things after they’ve happened; “20/20” is a doctor’s medical term for perfect eyesight. When we put those two terms together, we’re making an audacious statement: we’re claiming that we can see the past perfectly, that the meaning of past events is clear and obvious, and that we have a correct memory of the people who are a part of our past. But the fact is that no one views the past with complete accuracy, and two different individuals may remember the same people and events in two very different ways. In other words, hindsight is not always 20/20. Hindsight is often confused, contradictory, and conflicted.

To use a highly personal example, my own memories of my two grandmothers are nearly all warm and positive. Both were unfailingly loving, attentive, and generous to me as their grandson, for as long as they were physically able. But my parents’ memories of them were much more mixed, because my parents were dealing with extremely complex mothers and not doting grandmothers. Both of my grandmothers had serious mental health issues; and, as they got older, both grew more and more demanding of my parents. As a grandchild I was largely shielded from the dark side of these two women, but my parents lived in that darkness for many years. My parents loved them as much as I did, but what they saw in hindsight was quite distinct from what I saw.

This is the Fourth of July weekend, and if you’ll allow me a play on words, I want to give the expression “20/20 hindsight” a different twist. Americans are engaged in a lot of hindsight in the year 2020, especially in conjunction with Independence Day. The renewed outrage over racial injustice has prompted many of us to reflect again on our heritage as a nation. As a writer for the Associated Press put it, “We are reexamining our dark history and who it really holds dear. Statues are toppling, old heroes are being interrogated, and past indiscretion brought to light.”

As we look backwards on this Independence Day weekend, 2020, one of our difficulties is that “we, the people” do not always agree about what we see in hindsight. Some see in our past an inspiring story of freedom, expansion, progress, and prosperity which has benefited all our citizens. Others see America’s growth and success as the work of white supremacists, at the expense of Native Americans who were slaughtered and African Americans who were enslaved and who to this day are still oppressed. Which narrative are we to believe? Whose hindsight is 20/20?

Much of this reassessment of America's past has centered on our historical icons and heroes; and here again, we seem to have a hung jury. Was Christopher Columbus a great explorer and an important role model for later Italian Americans, or was he an instrument of European domination and the decimation of indigenous people? Was Robert E. Lee a great soldier and statesman who deserves to be remembered with admiration by all Americans, or was he the disgraced leader of a cause that history has judged to be unjust and immoral? Was Theodore Roosevelt a humanitarian and a conservationist, or was he a bigot and an imperialist? What's remarkable is that not even our founding fathers have been exempt from this scrutiny. Should George Washington and Thomas Jefferson continue to be revered as national heroes, or should they be discredited because both were slave owners?

In recent days, these debates have come to focus on the statues of famous people in our history. As the misdeeds of former leaders have been exposed, the call has gone out to remove the monuments to their memory from public places. One writer has called it "the Great Statucide" – a takeoff on the term genocide. Indeed, this is how some people view the elimination of certain statues. They see it as a misguided attempt to erase the past, to obliterate the memory of people who are an important part of their heritage. Others argue that statues are more than works of art; they are symbols of power – in this case, white supremacist power. The statues of slaveholders and segregationists therefore need to be removed from public view.

As I approached this Independence Day, 2020, I wondered if it is even possible to have 20/20 hindsight of our nation's history. I also wondered if the Scriptures offer a lens through which we can see our past more clearly and accurately. I believe they do. The 66 books of the Bible are a library of memories, a distant recollection of events and people who shaped our spiritual heritage. The Old Testament describes the deeds of Israel's "founding fathers" – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and its great national leaders like Moses and King David. The New Testament recounts the lives of heroic followers of Jesus who founded a new community of faith called the Church – individuals like Peter and Paul, James and John. Interestingly enough, what we learn from these accounts is that the biblical writers remember the same people in different ways.

Israel's memory of King David is a classic case in point. Many Old Testament texts remember David as a sensitive poet, a spiritual giant, a mighty warrior, and a great king. It was David, after all, who united the tribes of Israel, established Jerusalem as their capital, won a host of battles over pagan neighbors, and extended the country's boundaries to their farthest extent. When the writer of Chronicles summarizes David's legacy at the time of his death, he does so in almost worshipful terms: "Thus David son of Jesse reigned over all Israel. The period that he reigned over Israel was forty years . . . He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor" (1 Chronicles 29:26-28). That's quite the glowing eulogy! It's no wonder that later Israelites would come to view David as the ideal king. They longed for the days when a new king would rule over them who embodied David's goodness and power.

At the same time, other Old Testament writers portray David in more realistic terms. In hindsight, they see him as a great ruler, but also as a deeply flawed human being. The passage we read from 2 Samuel is set in the aftermath of David's infamous affair with Bathsheba. Not only does the king commit adultery with a woman who is married; he tries to cover his tracks by arranging for her husband to be killed in battle. The prophet Nathan confronts David about his acts of immorality and injustice; and, since he doesn't have a leg to stand on, David confesses and

repents. He does receive God's forgiveness, but both he and his kingdom suffer serious consequences as a result of his misdeeds.

What's instructive about all of this is that both pictures of David are preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is remembered for all his positive traits and accomplishments, but his negative track record is neither whitewashed nor ignored. Taken as a whole, the Old Testament memory of David is comprehensive and balanced. In other words, it is realistic, and therefore more likely to be accurate. Yes, David is a highly complex, imperfect man; but the biblical writers don't want us to write him off completely or eradicate him from our memories. To the contrary, they want us to remember David – the whole David, warts and all. He is both a positive model from which all of us could benefit, and a negative model which none of us should emulate.

So what does this suggest to us about how we remember America's notable leaders? First and foremost, we should remember them, not forget them. In hindsight, we may see them as flawed figures, but at the very least we can learn from their mistakes and seek to avoid repeating them. The witness of 20th Century Jews is helpful at this point. One might suppose that survivors of the Holocaust would want to forget the horrors they endured. But in fact, they want to remember those horrors; and they want the rest of the world to remember them, too, lest they be inflicted again upon new generations. This doesn't mean that a statue of Adolph Hitler should be left standing anywhere on the planet Earth. It does mean that Hitler and his legacy of hate should not be forgotten. They should serve as reminders of what happens when bigotry and discrimination are given free rein.

And so today, when we're tempted either to idealize or demonize the leaders in our past, it should be enough simply to humanize them, to see them realistically and judge them accordingly. If certain statues symbolize an abuse of power and give offense to those who were victimized by that power, it stands to reason that such statues should come down. But let's not forget the human beings who are represented in these statues and the lessons they have to teach us. These individuals were persons of their times, and their times were limited by short-sightedness and prejudice. You and I live in different times, and we should be held to a higher standard. Above all, we live in the time of a new creation in Jesus Christ, where hatred and bigotry have no place in our lives.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, it occurs to me that there is one great historical figure whose reputation has never been tarnished. Jesus alone has stood the test of hindsight. He remains the only human leader fully worth following, the only true role model for authentic living. He is glorified in statues and other works of art; but we don't really need these monuments to perpetuate his memory because we have something far better – a memorial meal that conveys his living presence.

When Jesus, the master, gathers his disciples for their last supper together, he washes their feet and commands them to assume this same servant stance toward others. Then he takes a loaf of bread and a cup of wine and declares that they represent his ultimate act of sacrifice – his broken body and shed blood on the cross.

Now, we would assume that the disciples would never again want to eat this bread and drink this wine, because they taste of the bitter dregs of death. But Jesus asks them to repeat this meal over and over again after he leaves them. And when they do it, they are to do it in remembrance of him.

There it is – the call to remember! Just when you and I want to forget the awfulness of the crucifixion and our own culpability in it, Jesus calls us to remember the love and forgiveness of God that are offered through it. Holy Communion gives us 20/20 vision of who Jesus is and 20/20 hindsight about what he has done for us. Jesus is the one leader from our past who never fails or disappoints. And he is the one leader in history who remains alive, accessible, and always helpful. Thanks be to God!