



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Gift of Memory**

Isaiah 63: 7-9

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December 24, 2022

Memory is a potent thing. Memory can call me back to days long gone by, can summon back in to life people who have long since died. I open up the book of my memories and out comes Christmas dinner with my grandparents—my grandfather holding the carving set looking over a crown roast of pork, my grandmother holding court at table. Turning further back I find my first day walking to preschool, or baby sitters making me noodles for lunch, calico and tabby cats slinking through the house. These memories are precious to me, but I have to make an effort to bring them up. Memory is a potent thing, and other kinds of memories will come marching forward without my invitation, unwelcome visitors to the present. A pride parade in Jerusalem just before tragedy, a caravan with my friend Josh in the lead losing control of his Volvo station wagon, moments when I disappointed myself and fell far short of my values, a Christmas day spent alone in a movie theater when weather and my own choices conspired to keep me far from home.

Memory is a potent thing, giving with one hand and taking away with the other. And Christmas is a time of memory. Today is the first (and only) Sunday of Christmas-tide. A little-observed liturgical season, it survives in popular imagination mostly in the song the Twelve Days of Christmas with its inexplicably large number of gifted birds. The season of Christmas is a season of memories and knowing what I do of the power of memory, it is a season when melancholy memories will crowd out joy if given just half a chance.

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,  
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,  
because of all that the Lord has done for us,  
and the great favour to the house of Israel  
that God has shown them according to divine mercy,  
according to abundant and steadfast love.

Here the prophet Isaiah takes up the work of memory, and makes of memory a gift. The prophet does the work of bringing to mind the gracious deeds of God and it becomes a gift for the ages. It was a challenging time for the people—great national threats from without and within have every chance to make the past seem brighter than the future. Memory is a potent thing, and it takes effort and work and intention to make

memory a source of strength for facing difficult days; it takes effort and work to make of memory a gift.

So my call to us all on this only Sunday of Christmas, on this Sunday of potent memories, my call to us is to do the work of Isaiah. Remember the gracious deeds of God, yes, in the Scriptures. We have luxuriated in the old and beautiful words of Scripture, how God came to live among us in the humblest of places. Remember the gracious deeds of God in the Scriptures, and remember too the gracious deeds of God in your own life. I don't know what those are for you. God's acts in the world are as numerous as the children of God themselves. Search your own memory. In the week that is to come, as you face into a new year uncertain of what will come, search your own memory for those places where God's gracious deeds have blessed your life. Begin the year calling to mind those most treasured places of memory—whatever they are for you. Write them down, tuck them into the pocket of a jacket you rarely wear, fold them up and put them in your wallet beside your insurance information, write them as a reminder on your phone set to ping for you in six months' time. Make of memory a gift for yourself that you will find and unwrap at a moment when you will have forgotten all about having done this.

Memory is a potent thing; the prophet Isaiah knows this, and we know this too, deep in our gut. On this first day of a new year, take that potent gift in your hand, call to mind the gracious deeds of God in your own life, and give yourself a gift for the facing of these days.

Amen.