

Some years back current ELCA bishop Mark Hanson and his wife Lone were heading out of town for a rare weekend alone. They packed their bags, loaded up the car, and scribbled out detailed instructions for Lone’s parents, who were staying with the kids. When it was time to go they called the children together to say goodbye. Hugs, kisses, a few tears ... but no sign of their four-year-old, Rachel. They checked her room, the TV room, the swingset ... no Rachel. They looked at the neighbor’s, at the park across the street. No Rachel. Finally, in full panic mode, they got in the car to drive around the neighborhood. As they sped away, a little voice came from behind the back seat: “Daddy, where are you going so fast?” The Hansons were beside themselves with relief. *Rachel! What are you doing back there?* “I saw you putting suitcases in the car, but I didn’t see mine. I didn’t want you to forget me too.”

Anyone here ever worry about being forgotten? That could be one of the saddest words in the English language. It brings to mind a young child clutching a blanket; an elderly woman rocking slowly, waiting for the visitor that never comes. And if it’s hard enough being forgotten by another person, it’s harder still being forgotten by God. That’s what it might seem for someone struggling with infertility, or chronic pain, or Alzheimer’s. When your whole world is falling apart it can feel as if God has headed out of town and left your suitcase out of the trunk.

For the exiles in Babylon, it probably felt like God had forgotten them, too. In the 40 years since they had been forced to leave their homeland a lot had changed. The vast majority of them had little to no memory of life in Israel. That was a problem because the covenant God made with Abraham – the promise that they would be God’s special people

– was seen as tied directly to the land. Now that they'd lost their land, was the promise still valid? Did that mean they'd lost their God too?

Perhaps we get so afraid of God forgetting us because we ourselves forget. As humans, it's a form of coping, survival really. The brain takes in more than 1 billion forms of stimuli every day. Memories are created every second. We can't possibly hold everything, and so the mind sifts and sorts, figuring out what to file and what to discard. And even though scientists claim we can train our brains into better remembering by eating the right foods and listening to classical music and doing word puzzles and sudoku, sometimes the things we forget are the things that matter most. Isaiah tries to comfort the people by asking *could a mother forget her children?* That seems unthinkable, doesn't it? But read the news. It happens. A woman puts her baby in the bathtub and wanders down to do some shoe shopping over the Internet. A harried dad drives to work without remembering to drop his little one off at day care. Our human memories sometimes fail us. Maybe we get so afraid of God forgetting us because we know that we ourselves forget.

And maybe we get so afraid of God forgetting us because we know what it's like to be forgotten. The PB yesterday had a story about a homeless drifter, a man named Thomas Orr. Like many people who are chronically homeless, Thomas struggled with mental illness. One poem he wrote included the line, "I like the nighttime best, cause daylight makes me feel like life's uninvited guest." He saw himself as a phantom, with no place to belong, though he did occasionally speak at churches and schools about his life. Last week, Thomas Orr died. There were no family members to mourn, just a simple pauper's burial in the cemetery. In death, as in life, Thomas Orr seemed forgotten.

Let's face it: It's hard to believe that God is there when experience seems to tell you otherwise. When you've spent too many nights worrying about your marriage. When

you've lost a sense of purpose and fulfillment. When terrorists attack and natural disasters kill innocent people. *Where is God* when life feels this way? *Could it be that he's forgotten you?* That feeling has led more than one person from faith to doubt.

And yet, some of the most fervent believers are those people who have made it through times of trial. Why? Because sometimes it's when we look back that we are able to see where God was with us. We can see God's footsteps beside us, see times when God has carried us. We can see the great cloud of witnesses who've cheered us on. We can find examples of inner strength we didn't know we had and signs of resilience and character that can only come from the Holy Spirit. We may best see God through the rear-view mirror – but when we do, we can be sure that even when it seems otherwise, God does not forget.

Have you experienced this in your own life? Is there a time when you can look back and see that God really was with you? Maybe you've felt a sense of peace as you were singing a hymn. You've experienced a flood of relief during a prayer. You've gotten a phone call from a friend when you needed it the most. And then you realize, *I'm not forgotten. God is still with me – God has always been with me.*

That's what happened for the Israelites. It might seem as if time in exile would have been a low point in the history of God's people. It certainly brought sorrow and challenges for the people who were uprooted from their former lives. But in these times of trial the Jews had to learn to trust in God in a whole new way. Without the land as a sign of God's covenant, they had to rely on telling the stories, which led to writing them down. Without the temple as a sign of God's presence and a place to worship, they had to develop rituals and traditions to keep the Sabbath. Without a king to hold them together, they had to rely on one another and on the sense of community. They had to remember that God was their

true king – and that God was faithful. Looking back, we can see how God was putting new possibilities in front of the people, leading them forward and helping them grow.

You know, this is kind of a pattern with in the Bible. It might have seemed God forgot Abraham and Sarah as they wondered how God’s promises would come true. But then angels showed up to tell them Sarah would have a son. It might have seemed God forgot the slaves in Egypt as they build the Pharaoh’s empire one back-breaking brick at a time. But God sent Moses to lead them to freedom. It might have seemed God forgot the people of Judah as they watched their temple ravaged by the Babylonians. But the words of prophets like Isaiah filled them with hope and rekindled their imagination. It might have seemed God forgot the citizens of Galilee living under Roman rule. But then God sent Jesus. He showed up in the most unexpected places, places too easily forgotten, like a manger, or a fishing boat, or a cross. It might seem God forgets us today, but the Holy Spirit continues to send help to us now. God never forgets.

Maybe the key to help us remember that comes at the start of today’s lesson. God’s word through Isaiah begins, “ In a time of favor I have answered you” – the NLT reads, “At just the right time” – God’s right time, not ours. If we can trust that God is faithful, if we can hold on to God’s promises, if we can just believe that God doesn’t forget even when that’s all we can seem to do – God will not let us down. Our God is a God of mercy and love. And that mercy and love is for you. Rachel Hanson, God will never forget you. People of Israel, God will never forget you. Thomas Orr, God will never forget you. Child of God, God will never forget you. Do you believe that? Believe it. Our God does not forget. Amen.