

Excursus on Memory

I: *But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they?* -- Job 14.10

"Did you remember Joe?" The words and the question they form come suddenly back to me. They materialize as if out of nowhere in the gathering shadows of a late afternoon. With those words comes also the voice, the voice from many years now long past: the sweet, kind, gentle voice of my wife's Aunt Marjorie.

Regularly, her call and her question would come late in May, the time of year when lilac blossoms fill the air with their heavy, musky scent. But she would call with her question during other times of the year too. In the Fall or the Winter, or even in the late Summer as well as the Spring, it wasn't unusual to find Marjorie's voice on the other end of the telephone, wondering if we remembered Joe.

The conversation would begin in a round about way. She'd ask how we were and about things at the ranch. She would wonder about the neighbor families she still remembered and maybe even share a few morsels of gossip from the extended family. But the question would always come. And I learned to wait for it. "So tell me," Marjorie would ask, "did you remember Joe?"

II: *As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.* -- Job 14.11-12

Marjorie's question always fascinated me. I think about its challenge even to this day. For Joe -- Marjorie's brother and my wife's uncle -- died long before I was ever grafted into the family tree. He died too young and too sadly. No one talked much about him, not even Marjorie. It was as if mention of his name would rip open old wounds and bring the pain of his loss back all over again.

Once I asked her about Joe's passing, and she remarked simply: "I can't go back to that place." She never spoke much of her brother. But she wanted to make sure he was remembered. This challenge was entrusted to my wife. But as I grew onto the family tree, Marjorie enlisted my help too. I was asked to remember -- to remember someone I never knew. "Did you remember Joe?"

What does it mean to remember? The question is simple enough. Any answer to it, though, has many dimensions. I like to think I have pondered most of them as they related to remembering Joe. Really, I have barely scratched the surface. On one level, the task of memory was quite simple. Marjorie wanted us to put flowers on Joe's grave. "I'll pay for them," she would explain, "don't worry about the cost."

III: *Oh that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!* -- Job 14.13

Yet there was more that she wanted, really -- more than a nice bouquet marking Joe's final resting place. It took me a while to figure this out, for Marjorie never really

articulated what she meant when she asked that we remember her brother. And I was slow to catch on. But I eventually realized that remembering Joe involved trying to save him from the overwhelming obscurity of time.

For time, as is its wont, erases everything. Its motive force obliterates the small and the great, the powerful and the powerless, the unknown and the prominent. No one is safe from time's expunging power. Any human struggle against it is ultimately doomed. But Marjorie fought this battle anyway. And she enlisted our help in her campaign against time's rapacious forces. "Did you remember Joe?"

The question carried with it a measured urgency, an urgency which grew with the passing years. By the time I came along, Joe had been dead almost as long as he had been alive. Marjorie could feel the waves of Lethe's waters lap away the few scattered traces of her brother's life. As her own life drew closer to its end, the challenge of remembering her lost brother became more acute. No small talk cluttered my final conversation with Marjorie, only the question: "Did you remember Joe?"

IV: *If mortals die, will they live again? All the days of my service I would wait until my release should come.* -- Job 14.14

Like her brother, Marjorie is gone now. She reposes in a place not far away from Joe, in the family plot of the municipal cemetery. Time is taking her away too -- for though it seems like just a little while since she died, she has been gone now for almost fifteen years. Time scatters away the remnants of her existence just like it has done with her brother.

I think about all this. And part of me feels sad. For I realize what I have always known -- that any human struggle against time's obscuring forces is doomed. Marjorie realized this too, I think. Yet she fought the good fight anyway. And I myself choose to continue her campaign of memory, of remembering even someone I never knew.

But I find grace -- even in this star-crossed struggle. And I find hope, too. Not, of course, in anything I might do to counter the obliterating forces of time. Instead, I hope in the God who transcends time. I hope as well in the grace of the Lord who identified himself as Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End.

Our mortal destiny is to be forgotten by time.

But where time forgets, the One who was and is and is to come remembers us. "If mortals die, will they live again?" Christ's empty tomb answers the question asked by Job. Along with Joe and now Marjorie, I remember this promise. And in remembering, there is grace.

Tim Lanham, Pastor