

Hope, Remember, Obey: The Already and Not Yet - Ginger Coakley  
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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

My husband is an avid movie watcher, so, as you can imagine, we spend many of our free nights watching movies. Recently with friends we watched a movie that everyone in the room had seen except for me. I'm the kind of movie watcher that cannot just watch to see what happens, but instead I am trying to remember what has happened, anticipating what will happen and predicting an outcome...and of course I must share my theory with the room.

In a similar fashion, in a recent Facebook post well known author Jen Hatmaker shares her discovery of a category of people she calls "end of book readers." She says, "I think what you are telling me is that books with difficult plots make you anxious. You don't enjoy the middle reading part because you are too worried. You also like movie spoilers. OK. I see. Suspense is not your jam." These readers are looking to know the end of the story first; their anticipation gets the better of them.

Then there are movie watchers and book readers who just want to see the story unfold. They are resting in the moment, appreciating what is behind and not looking forward. These people do not like watching movies with me!

Our texts today balance us in the plot development. They send us looking way back and propel us to look far forward, and since we are nearing the end of a church year, we do this on the cusp of the season of Advent. The end of the story is informed and balanced by the beginning of the story. We cannot approach the end with confidence if we do not have the perspective of the beginning. Joshua tells us the story of old while Matthew with 1 Thessalonians expands horizons of understanding for the 'end of the story'. Why we are seeing these just before Advent is compelling to me. In Advent we are just about to reach the climax of promises foretold the Israelites, leaning into remembering what has occurred with the birth of the Christ Child and the waiting for Christ to come again. I am thrilled these texts are before us just in time for Advent. They make us readers and hearers of the WHOLE story of God, bringing a nice amalgamation of remembering, resting, and anticipation.

These four texts come full circle for me in our Psalm. The final verse of our selected passage reads: "...so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments." This is for the people of God, past, present and future. This is an ordinance to set hope in God, to REMEMBER and to obey all God has commanded.

In Joshua and Psalms, we get a retelling of the story of Abraham. We remember that Abraham was called by God to leave his country. The first place God stopped Abraham on that journey was at Shechem and it was there that God made covenant with Abraham to give him family who would inherit that particular land. In our Joshua passage, they are Abraham's family—now turned into a nation—they are standing at Shechem holding possession of THAT land where God stopped Abraham. Joshua is standing before them calling them to REMEMBER their story and to choose God as their only God. Can they do it? Will they do it? YES, they commit, asking how

they could choose any other God; He has freed them from slavery, performed mighty things in their sight, protected them through the desert and through the battles. This nation is all-in because they have seen God do mighty things. They REMEMBER God's graciousness to them and they set their hope and their children's hope on that same trajectory. And for the trajectory to continue, it is made clear what simple acts they must perform. They make covenant saying, "The Lord we will serve, and we will obey Him". They are on a trajectory to set their HOPE, to REMEMBER all God has done, and to OBEY Him.

The Israelites are standing in the tension of already and not yet. They have this long story of God choosing their father Abraham and freeing them from captivity, and conquering lands and nations for them. This 'already' story is strong enough to give their nation and lives over to following God. The future is bright with hope, but wholly unknown. The story they had always been told was only up to the point at which they now were...so what was next to come? They knew only to live in the promise of hope, to remember what had been, and to live in obedience to God's commands. They are living the beginning of the already and the not yet journey.

The thread connecting Joshua to the apocalyptic themes of Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4 jumps us to the other end of this spectrum. The world has seen Jesus, identified him as the Son of Man, watched him die on a cross; they are making sense of an empty tomb and sightings of a man risen-from-the-dead. Now they, having seen all those mighty works of God, are asking what is next. The already and the not yet for the new Christians has a very different trajectory. They are standing between promises. The promise of THE messiah, Jesus Christ and the promise of the MESSIAH coming again. They have seen the man who would forgive their sins, but now are waiting for the ONE who would save, redeem, and restore the world.

However, the Christian's waiting is no different than the Israelite's waiting. The message is the same. Set your hope in God, remember all He has done, and live a life in obedience to His commands. Such is the life of holiness, living in preparedness to receive God's graciousness and to experience His making of things new.

How do we do this today as people standing far removed from SEEING God's mighty acts of fulfilling promises of scripture? How do we live in this tension of the already and the not yet? We know the beginning of the story, we know the middle of the story, we can read Revelation and have some idea of what is to come. But how do we wait?

We wait just as the psalmist says: open our mouths, recount the stories of old for our children, continually tell of God's graciousness to his people...to you and to me. Our children will learn both that we do, and that they can, set hope in God, putting us all on a trajectory to REMEMBER His good works and to have courage to live in obedience, prepared for the not yet where we will know rest and peace and completion.

You may not be able to see, through the robe, but under here is a nice baby bump. This period of pregnancy is a strangely tangible experience of the already and not yet. Pregnancy is a journey I have taken before, an already experience; however, the baby boy forming inside is clearly a not-yet experienced mighty work of God. Our first son, Thailer, is quite a joy, but we were not prepared for him. Lee and I had just gotten married. In our journey God performed mighty

works in making both of us ready for the other, but almost immediately following the honeymoon we learned we were pregnant and were thrust into the new journey of parenthood. We can look back and see God's mighty work in our lives—how He spoke love over us, was patient with our (my!) fears. Even through a 45-hour labor we can see God's provision and mighty work in delivering Thailer and me healthy at the end of the process. Though this pregnancy is very different, and nearly opposite, from the first, I can look back at the already of healthy delivery and an amazing little boy, and remember that God is faithful and mighty. He loves us, and He has redeemed our misgivings into something beautiful that he will use for His glory.

Standing in the already and the not yet is much like pregnancy. It is a waiting time, but it is not an idle time. It is a time of growth, it is a time to set hope in what is to come, a time to remember the story of how we have gotten to where we are. It is a time of action, obedient action that takes steps toward the delivery of another mighty work of God.

At this point I want to ask a question. How do we rehearse our own histories? How do we as people, as families, and as a church recount and remember the ways of God in previous generations? What is the place of Shechem for you where God made a promise and was faithful to bring it about? I recently learned of two conversations this church is having, one in regards to finances and giving more outside of yourselves, and the other one of sending out and planting yourselves in an additional community. How will you stand in the already and not yet of those questions and endeavors? I'd like to invite you in just a few moments to answer these questions during the Prayers of the People and to let the psalm guide you in that prayer as we set our hope in God, remember His mighty work and keep His commands. I've shortened my sermon time to allow for extra time for these prayers, so please give praise to God for what He has already done and pray forward what is yet to come.

I'll close with a reading of our selection from Psalm 78 from The Message: *Listen, dear friends, to God's truth, bend your ears to what I tell you. I'm chewing on the morsel of a proverb; I'll let you in on the sweet old truths, stories we hear from our fathers, counsel we learned at our mother's knee. We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation—God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things he has done. He planted a witness in Jacob, set his Word firmly in Israel, then commanded our parents to teach it to their children so the next generation would know, and all the generations to come—know the truth and tell the stories so their children can trust in God, never forget the works of God but keep his commands to the letter.*