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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

## IT'S ABOUT TIME: YESTERDAY

When I was a kid, there was a television series called “The Time Tunnel.” It told the story of a secret governmental project called Tic Toc, in which two scientists use an experimental time tunnel to travel back in time. In each episode, by the wildest of coincidences, they wind up in a pivotal location just before a major historic event was about to occur. They are at Pearl Harbor right before the Japanese attack. They are on Krakatoa immediately before it erupts. One of them is captured by soldiers of Troy and the other accompanies the Greeks inside the Trojan Horse to carry out a rescue. By television magic, everyone wherever and whenever they travel, speaks modern English. Hey, I’m sure it was a bit cheesy, but I was eight years old and I thought it was great.

In looking up information about the series, I found that the very first episode was called “Rendezvous with Yesterday,” during which the two time travelers find themselves on a fancy cruise ship in 1912 that is called – can you guess? It’s the RMS Titanic the day before it is to collide with the iceberg and sink. In this series, as with most time travel stories, recorded history could not be altered - all attempts to do so were destined to fail. However, sometimes the time travelers’ actions were essential to cause history to unfold as it did. <sup>1</sup>

When you and I have a rendezvous with yesterday, it is generally less adventurous than with televised time travelers. None of us have had any choice about when and where we were born. But all of us who have lived long enough to reach adulthood, have made certain choices within the parameters presented. We may migrate geographically, but we only move through time forward day by day. Yet we have a frequent rendezvous with yesterday through parts of our identity that are genetically or experientially given to us by our families of origin. We have also made some choices about who we are by identifying with specific parts of our past. Some of those shaping events occurred before we were born. Others are direct experiences

we have had on certain yesterdays creating memories that mold our self-understanding as well as our sense of purpose.

In our Old Testament text, we hear reference to what may be one of the oldest oral histories found in scripture. Our reading from Deuteronomy includes an expression of identity that begins: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.” This is a reference to Jacob, who came from the Aramean people of Mesopotamia. Jacob’s family went to Egypt when there was a famine and over time, that extended family grew into the Hebrew people, who eventually were enslaved there. The oral history passed down was a precursor to the Exodus story, which offered these people a sense of rootedness, not in only one place, but in divine deliverance from slavery and divine guidance into a place of promise. This brief corporate history countered spiritual amnesia, so that the people would not offer only the leftovers of their lives to the God who had done so much for them. They could look back at their yesterdays and be filled with gratitude.

How yesterdays are understood can shape our experience of today and tomorrow. Southern author, William Faulkner, wrote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”<sup>2</sup> That’s true for even those of us who aren’t southerners. What is at play though is how we are going to deal with the presence of the past. Those who are mourning a loss of a loved one often have a strong affinity for what has been. Their memories may not be an accurate depiction of what was, but they may well long for certain times that they look back to with fondness. That can be a natural part of a grieving process. But I’ve been aware of some people who over a long period of time are so captivated with the past that it can lead to a captivation by the past. This not only includes those who have a more than healthy dose of nostalgia; it also applies to those who are emotionally scarred by what has happened to them. They may be bitter or disillusioned by an ongoing rendezvous with yesterday. Dealing in healthy ways with a difficult past for these people is what could open the way for possible healing. We don’t have to be slaves of the past.

Seeking deliverance, we study the Biblical story of what God has said and done in the past, because such an understanding of yesterday offers us a rootedness in the

faith and a way forward toward redemption. Stories of people from long ago and from a different region of the world have become a part of our autobiography, for we recognize that like them, we too need to be delivered and guided by God's grace at work in our lives. We don't travel back in time and try to relive their lives. Our world is different in significant ways. However, their experiences inform and inspire our own.

Many yesterdays ago, a person named Jesus was born, lived, ministered, was executed, and was resurrected. Through him, God continues to bring forgiveness and reconciliation into the world. God does not need to be reconciled to us; we need to be reconciled to God. When the Apostle Paul writes that "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new," he is not discounting the significance of the past. Rather, he is talking about a fresh start from our brokenness that otherwise could drag us down as a result of past choices. The newness is not a reference to someone simply making a new year's resolution or turning over a new leaf. It is what God can do within us that redeems our yesterdays and opens the way to a new today and tomorrow. The identity of grace we experience in Christ opens up new and wonderful possibilities.

A number of years ago, a minister named Fred Craddock was vacationing in eastern Tennessee. He and his wife were at a restaurant, when they were approached by an elderly man who struck up a conversation with them. When he found out that Fred was a minister, the man told him, "I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church. I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, also fell on me. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

"In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains... It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don't know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome

since I was, as they put it, a bastard. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing in a church?’

“One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and he seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, ‘Well, boy, you’re a child of...’ and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, ‘Boy, you’re a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.’ Then he swatted me on the (back) and said, ‘Now, you go claim your inheritance.’ I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.”

Those listening were moved by the man’s story and asked him his name. He told them he was Ben Hooper, and Craddock recognized the man as the one who as an adult had twice been elected the governor of the state of Tennessee.<sup>3</sup> His yesterday had been transformed, so he could move from shame to a life of gratitude.

In thinking more about The Time Tunnel show I mentioned previously, in each episode, those working in the secret location with the Tic Toc project were trying to get the time travelers back to the present. Instead, through tinkering with the controls for the time tunnel, they only managed to get them relocated to another time in history that would set up the episode for the following week’s show. After the first season, the show was cancelled, so they never got to act out a concluding episode that returned the characters to the present day. You and I also have a rendezvous with and an experience of yesterday, but by God’s grace, we don’t have to be stuck there. We draw some of our identity from yesterday, but the unfinished business of the past leaves us in a current state of brokenness. That is, until God, the time traveler who is never bound by time, moves to redeem our yesterdays,

giving us an identity as God's own beloved family, opening the way to a new today and tomorrow. In Christ, everything has become new. Thanks be to God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Time\\_Tunnel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Time_Tunnel)

<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun, Random House, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, pp. 156-157.