



## REMEMBER

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Back in 1954, Elwyn Brooks White sat down at his typewriter to write his annual Christmas column for the New Yorker. You probably know E.B. White as the author of Charlotte's Web, but for years, he also wrote for the New Yorker magazine. And he felt like his Christmas column was always one of his most difficult to write. He wanted to say something new and fresh, something that expressed the thoughts he most wanted to share with his readers at Christmastime. And the right words were always just out of reach. He said he would stare at the typewriter keys the way people look for a greeting card in the grocery store – intensely scanning the shelf for the one with exactly the right phrase to capture everything we feel and want to say – all on a little folded piece of colorful paper that costs five dollars.

Can you relate to that idea of wanting to get Christmas exactly right? Looking for the perfect present to give someone. Trying to find the perfect tree. Putting on a feast nobody will ever forget.

I heard a radio commercial that said “You want to be dazzled this holiday season.” There are these hopes and expectations for wonder. I even feel that way as I'm preparing my Christmas Eve message each year. People come to this service looking for a special memory, the sights and sounds and smells of Christmas. It's got to FEEL like sleigh bells and candles and hot cider and not like a class lecture. What we want is a moment as ideal as that greeting card we can never seem to find.

But back to E.B. White. As he was struggling with what to say in his Christmas article in 1954, he recalled a conversation he had had with his Aunt Caroline a few weeks earlier. Aunt Caroline was 92 and she lived with E.B. and his wife. She was a woman from a different century, who always seemed to know what to say. But her words sounded like they came from another time and place, they were so precise and unrushed.

The White family lived on the East Coast, which as you know has spectacular fall foliage. Aunt Caroline loved nothing more than to go for a drive in the country and look at the changing colors of the leaves. But this particular time, they had not had a chance to go, and when he realized it, E.B. White felt horrible. He went to his aunt and said, “I'm so sorry we didn't get out for a ride to see the leaves. I know that's your favorite thing.”

Aunt Caroline looked at him and she said, “Why my dear – remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen.” It was such an unexpected answer that he said it felt like a bird had just flown in the room. She didn’t need a new experience – she just needed to remember what she had already seen. That was enough for her.

When it comes to Christmas, we spend all this energy trying to create something new, when maybe what we most need is to remember. I believe it was C.S. Lewis who said that Christians don’t so much need to be taught as we need to be reminded. We don’t need a brand new experience– we need to remember what we already know. There is such a beauty and truth in the story of Christmas that it doesn’t require a lot of window dressing – all we have to do is remember it well. Because when we do, it speaks to that deepest part of us that’s searching so hard for something. When we do, it’s still as surprising as if a bird flew in the room. Remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen.

Remembering might seem like a given at Christmas. How could you not? The whole holiday has a nostalgic tone to it. It’s the only time of year you’ll hear 50 year old songs playing on the radio. Adults dig into the attics of their minds and pull out stories from their childhood. That’s part of the season. But being sentimental is not the same as remembering.

USA Today featured an article last week on Christmas caroling. Apparently it’s falling out of fashion. It turns out most people aren’t really all that keen on either singing or being sung to. Although I did see a commercial the other night where a family took a singing Christmas card to their neighbors and let that do their caroling for them. So maybe the tradition will just take new forms.

Anyway, the article had a chart with it that tracked trends in other Christmas traditions. They compared people’s habits in 1996 with those of today. Most of them were pretty similar – 65% are sending greeting cards this year, compared with 72% ten years ago. Exchanging gifts is up to 79% this year from 77% in 1996. But the poll also asked if people were doing any religious reflection over the holidays. In 1996, 57% said yes. This year, just 22% said Christmas would cause them to remember anything spiritual.

At least that’s honest. We can maintain all the trappings of the holiday without giving a second thought to God or what he did for us by sending Jesus to earth. Maybe the story feels so overly familiar to us that it’s lost some of its glory, and even though we may believe it’s true, it no longer takes our breath away. So we start looking for that feeling of awe somewhere else.

On the TV show *House*, Dr. House was treating a patient who was a magician. He came in with some mysterious symptoms and was doing spectacular card tricks for the doctors. When Dr. House tried to get him to reveal his secrets, he said, “Then it wouldn’t be magic anymore. People come to my show for a sense of wonder. They want an experience they can’t understand.”

Dr. House responded with this line: “If the wonder’s gone when the truth is known, there never was any wonder.”

There’s no real wonder at Christmas apart from the truth about Jesus. The magical moment we want is great, but if there’s no truth behind it, no substance, it’s not going to last.

What we most need is to remember. Remembering sounds like a weak, passive kind of word, but I’d like to turn it into a strong one. I want to change the way we think about that word.

Alec read a sentence out of Luke tonight about Mary.

**Luke 2:19**

*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

That’s a great description of remembering. Treasuring up all these things and pondering them in your heart.

Luke says Mary treasured “all these things.” She gathered up several different components of the story and stitched them all together in her mind.

You know the word dismember. What does it mean? To take something (or someone) apart. Something whole is divided and separated into pieces. I dismembered our dryer not too long ago. Fortunately I was able to “re-member” it as well.

And that’s just it. We can think of re-remembering as the opposite of dismembering. It’s bringing all the pieces together again into a whole picture. Another word for remember is recollect, and that gives you an even better visual. The “re” means again, so it is a collecting again of the parts of the story.

It is that process of bringing the story together again in our minds that is so invaluable, because that’s us interacting with it.

Every year during the holidays, my mom likes to do puzzles. She always has one with a landscape or a Norman Rockwell painting or lots of Amish children. She’ll sit for long sessions at a time, turning the little cardboard pieces around to find just where they go. It takes hours and hours to get one completed. Finally, when it’s all done, what happens? It might sit on the table for a couple days, but then it goes right back in the box. Why? Because the point was to do the puzzle – not admire it. She could just buy a poster if all she wanted was a picture to look at. It’s the process of working it out and piecing it together that she finds challenging and relaxing.

With the Christmas story, the point is not just to know the facts and admire them – the point is to re-remember them, to put them together in our hearts, to interact with them. It is the act of engaging the story personally that makes all the difference. Why? Because

we're not just reviewing historical facts from 2000 years ago – we're looking for how what happened back then connects with what's going on in our world. That's what the high schoolers were pointing out in their video – putting the story of Jesus in the context of our lives. It looked strange to see a manger in a coffee shop or on a sidewalk or bus, but it's a picture of how we are to look for Christ in all the corners of our lives.

I might feel like I've known the facts about Jesus and Mary and Joseph since I was little. The story hasn't changed. But I have. So my interaction with the story is going to be different each Christmas. Every time I come to the text, I bring with me a different set of joys and hurts and needs and mistakes. Every time I come I've got a fresh batch of guilt and pride, and that means I need a fresh batch of grace. That's why I like the verse in Lamentations that says

### **Lamentations 3:22-23**

*His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.*

The story of God's mercy never gets old, because it is new every morning – ready for whatever we bring to it each day. To remember is NOT to rehash tired, ancient traditions – it's to come back to the power of God's love that is fresh for us every single day, because we need it to be fresh every single day.

When he was nearing the end of his life, the Apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, and he summed up his challenge for Timothy in this way:

### **2 Timothy 2:8-10**

*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.*

Remember Jesus Christ. Rethink him. Re-engage with him. Paul zeroes in on the heart of what that means: He's God, because he rose from the dead, overcoming our biggest enemy and giving us hope to do the same. And he was also human, born into the line of David, fully experiencing our pain and suffering. We need to know he identifies with our situation as much as we need to know he can help us through it. Back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine of Hippo said,

*How much you have loved us kind Father!  
If your Word had not become flesh  
and had not dwelt among us,  
we would have had to believe  
that there was no connection  
between God and humanity  
and we would have been in deep despair.*

Jesus, the Son of God, also the Son of David. That, Paul says, is his gospel. That's his good news, good enough for Paul to be willing to go to jail for it. Good enough for

everything that's evil to want to contain it. *But God's word is not chained.* Hallelujah! God's word speaks freedom and cannot be bound by time and space. It's unstoppable. It's uncontainable.

That means it's not an ancient story trapped in the pages of an old book. It's living and active and ready to be re-membered in our present situation. God's word is not chained – it's about breaking chains, setting us free from whatever is holding us today.

This Christmas Eve, my hope for you is not just to think about the details of the first Christmas. My hope is that you will really re-member it, to put it together again in light of your own life. What has changed about you since the last time you thought about what Jesus did for you? What about your life can you bring to that baby in a manger who grew to know human suffering and overcame life's ultimate hurts? Actually, it's not what I can bring to the manger – it's where can I bring that manger into my world? Where am I needing to see Jesus in my life? As you go through the process of putting your own puzzle together and you find the piece about Jesus, how is it going to fit with the piece of pain in your own life?

Asking that kind of question is what re-membering the story is all about. And Jesus says the pieces do fit. He is here. He is now. He is interested in your situation. God entered our world as a baby and he hasn't left. Jesus invites us to come to him with our burdens and our need and hopes and our fears. He says I will walk with you and carry the load. You are not alone. That's the real wonder of Christmas.

The original truth is still as moving and beautiful as ever – that God loved the world so much that he gave us his one and only son, so that whoever believed in him could have eternal life.

We don't have to add to that or change it up – we just have to remember it well. Remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen.