

“Letting go of guilt”  
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*Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8*

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Have you ever had that experience where you’re happily walking along until, out of nowhere, this random, embarrassing memory pops into your head? One moment, you’re a confident adult, and then the next, you’re a puddle of teenage angst.

If you have experienced this, you’re not alone. Psychologists refer to these experiences as involuntary memories. And believe it or not, they serve a purpose. According to Chris Brewin at London’s Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, these memories are essential to helping us process socially inappropriate or harmful behavior and avoid doing it again.

It makes you wonder, though. Because there are some people—we won’t name names—who seem to have missed out on this evolutionary advantage. Man at Walmart with your butt hanging out of your pants—you could use a little more shame. Woman who parks her Mustang down the center line of two parking spaces in the church lot and then walks over to the YMCA—you could use a little more shame. Pretty much every politician who ever lived—you could use a lot more shame.

We get it: shame is an appropriate response to harming another person or failing to live up to our principles. Memory helps us hold onto that shame and become better people.

But what if we couldn’t forget? Ever? What if, even after we’ve confessed and repented, even years later, we were still reliving our sins as if they were happening right now? It turns out that there are currently 55 people in the United States who know exactly what that is like. They have a rare ability called highly superior autobiographical memory. What I just described as involuntary memories isn’t occasional for them; it’s every second of their lives. They remember every detail, every sensation, every feeling, from every moment. They can remember what they had for dinner five years ago. They can remember the award they got in sixth grade and how the prize felt in their hands. And, of course, they can remember every ounce of shame.

For them, there’s no such thing as a clean slate; “there are no fresh days.”<sup>1</sup> They can’t forget.

While neuroscientists may value the occasional involuntary memory, they also recognize that at some point, we’ve got to forget.

Every week, in worship, we say a prayer of confession and hear that we are forgiven. Every year, during Advent, we hear that Christ is about to be born again, that God is about to create a new future, where the past is left behind in the dust of love and forgiveness. But do we believe it? I

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<sup>1</sup> “When Memories Never Fade, The Past Can Poison the Present,” NPR, Alex Spiegel.

mean, do we truly believe that we are forgiven? Do we really believe that Christ is about to usher in a new reality of amnesty and grace?

Because if we don't believe, then we become like those people who can't forget. We become so clogged with memories, with guilt and shame, that there isn't enough room for grace.

Sometimes the guilt that clogs our lives isn't even deserved. We are constantly being bombarded with messages of how we're not good enough, not pretty enough, not skinny enough, not smart enough, not wealthy enough, not hard-working enough. Hearing these messages day in and day out, we end up feeling guilty for stuff that's not even wrong—for feeling tired, or angry, or sad; for having normal human limitations; or just for being different.

And, so, we get stuck there, stuck in the gooey tendrils of our guilt.

The Israelites who are listening to the prophet Isaiah, they're stuck too. They have lived in exile for so long that by the time Isaiah promises a path home, they can't believe it. They know how wrong things got. In fact, the Book of Isaiah, up until this fortieth chapter, is almost entirely condemnation. The people turned away from God and worshiped pretenders to the throne. They hurt their neighbors and exploited the vulnerable.

There's no way they can make up for the pain they caused, or the faithlessness they exhibited.

By the time John the Baptist arrives, the people are wondering the same thing. He promises forgiveness and a future, but they look around them, and all they can see is reason for despair.

I recently heard about a youth group that wanted to better understand what John the Baptist was talking about. So they went for a hike. Every quarter mile or so, each youth picked up a rock and placed it in their backpack. After hiking hours up a steep hill, their backs were bent and aching beneath the weight of all the rocks they had picked up. The stones were like all the little bits of guilt and shame we carry with us.

As they reached the top of the hill, they should have been happy, but all they could feel was the heaviness on their backs. Suddenly, the youth leader invited them to remove their bags and empty them into the valley below. To dump out all the rocks. To let them go. At first, it was hard to believe. They had spent hours collecting these rocks. But after the shock wore off, one by one, they removed their bags and emptied them over the side. They stood up straight, their backs light again. They tasted the coolness of the air. They looked down into the valley and saw its flowing river, its green grass, its red and orange flowers. And for the first time, in a long time, they felt free. They felt alive. They couldn't even remember what the weight had felt like.

And for the first time, maybe ever, they understood what grace really is.

I hope that they took the time to handle each of the rocks, to think about what each represented. Because Isaiah and John don't ask us simply to forget. They know that some hurts are just too big, too heavy, for that. They ask us to remember and repent. To name our guilt, to name every

burden we're carrying, and to commit ourselves to the final act of letting go—and accepting a different kind of life, more loving and faithful, happier and freer.

I also hope that they recognized that this act of emptying their bags wasn't about forgiving themselves. Self-forgiveness is just another rock, another burden to carry. This was about letting *God* forgive them. It was about casting the rocks to the wind and trusting that someone, something, would be there to receive them, to break them down and create new life.

Isaiah describes God as a shepherd who lifts us up in gentle arms, carrying us home, like lost lambs. When we remove our bags, name our guilt and shame, and toss them away, we empty our souls so that they are light enough for God to pick us up. It's how we make room for God's grace.

Do you remember how in the Harry Potter series, characters magically draw out their memories and pour them into the Pensieve? Dumbledore explains, "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind."

Think of God's grace as the Pensieve where we pour all of our shame, all of our past. It is the green valley that takes our rocks and makes them sprout with life.

The Pensieve of God's grace means we don't have to remember forever.

In our reading from Isaiah, God declares that everything that is not God's word withers and fades. Everything that's not God—all of our sin, all of our shame, all of our hurt and despair, every heavy stone, every haunting memory—all of it withers and fades. Think about what that promise would mean for the 55 individuals whose memories seem never to fade. Think about what it would mean for the person still climbing the mountain, still laboring beneath the weight of so many rocks.

It means being free.

What remains is God's word. A word that Isaiah and Mark call the Good News. God does not remember our sins forever. We are forgiven.

When all things pass away, all that remains is God's love. All that remains is us as we were created to be. Lambs in the arms of Jesus.

God is opening a road for us, this Advent. A road to peace, to joy, and to new life—a forgiven and freed life. And so I want you to take the index cards and pens you received from an usher. Write on your card something that you need to turn over to God this Advent. Something for which you need forgiveness. Or maybe something that isn't even wrong, but has you feeling ashamed. Something that you want to see wither and fade. Something you want to be free of.

When you've finished writing, I want you to take that card, look at it for a moment, and then rip it up. Rip it up! And throw in the air. Don't worry about the mess; we'll clean it up. Just let it go. Try doing this every day in Advent. God will take it from there. **Amen.**