

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Lent 5
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Selective memory

—Jeremiah 31:31-34

Have you ever had your computer hard drive crash?

I bought my very first hard drive back around 1987. Before that we stuck floppy disks into the computer to boot it up and to store information. My first hard drive was a 30-megabyte hard drive manufactured by Seagate. It was big, it was clunky, it cost almost \$400 in 1987 dollars. We thought that 30 megabytes was huge; it was the equivalent of about 90 floppy disks! Today it would store about 3 uncompressed digital photos, and it wouldn't even hold the file for the bulletin that you have in your hand this morning, but back then we didn't have digital photography, and Microsoft Publisher hadn't been invented yet, so we had no idea how we would ever fill up that much space on a hard drive. But there was one big problem with a hard drive. Inside that drive is a magnetic platter that spins very quickly under a magnetic head that records and reads the data. That read/write head floats on a cushion of air just a tiny fraction of a millimeter above the surface of the platter. All it took was a jiggle or a bump or even moving the computer when it was turned on with the hard drive spinning, and that read/write head could contact the surface of the platter and scratch the surface and destroy the data. That's why it's called "crashing" the hard drive, analogous to an airplane skimming above the surface, then plowing into the ground and destroying everything in its path.

Thankfully, technology has improved over the years. Hard drives can store more information, and they've become much more reliable. We've gone from megabytes to gigabytes to terabytes (that's trillions of bytes). The new solid-state drives do away with magnetic platters altogether and use electronic memory instead. And now we can use Dropbox to sync our files, and we can back up to the cloud. But we still all understand what it's like to lose data. All your work on a yearlong project and all the family photos can still be lost if they're not backed up. Computers still fail and forget what they're supposed to remember. And when they do, it's still a disaster.

We don't want our computers to forget and lose data, but what about the memory inside our heads? Do you ever find it hard to remember what you're supposed to remember and hard to forget what you'd like to forget? It's bad enough when we can't remember something we studied for a test, or we walk out into the garage to get something and then we can't remember what we came out to get. But I would submit that as bad as it is not to be able to remember something, sometimes it's even worse when we can't forget something. Maybe you suffered great trauma in your past, maybe in a past relationship or in your childhood, because of things that happened to you, and you can't forget. Maybe you made a huge mistake and committed a grievous sin that still weighs on your conscience and fills you with regret, and you can't forget. Maybe you look back on your life and you see the missed opportunities, the failed plans, the unfulfilled hopes and dreams, the broken relationships, the hurt you've caused others, and you can't forget. Sometimes it's good to remember hard lessons from the past; it can keep us from repeating past mistakes. Other times they're just painful memories, and you can't forget.

In the Old Testament the Children of Israel forgot some things they were not supposed to forget. They forgot the covenant the LORD their God had made with them. It was at Mount Sinai, almost 1500 years before Christ, after God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, that he said to them, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6). There was a reason why God made the nation of Israel his chosen people, made a covenant with them, and gave them his laws. He wanted Israel to be separate from the surrounding nations. The covenant he made and the laws he gave were intended to hedge his people off, to protect and to insulate the Israelites from all the filth and wickedness around them. God needed his people to be protected because the Savior of the world was promised to come from these people, and God needed to keep that line of the promise intact until Jesus could be born. That way there would be people on earth actually watching and waiting for the Messiah to come, and when the Savior came people would actually know how to recognize him. So God made a covenant with them and said, "Come out from them and be separate" (Isaiah 52:11).

But the Israelites forgot God's covenant. "'They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD." God often uses marriage language to describe his relationship with his people. As a faithful, loving husband, God wanted to care for his beautiful bride. But Israel and Judah were unfaithful. They jumped the fence that was there to protect them, and they went out of bounds. They sniffed around and lusted after wickedness, and they prostituted themselves to foreign gods. God sent his prophets—men like Isaiah and Jeremiah and many

others—to call his people to repentance, but the people mistreated and killed God's messengers. So God did not forget their sin; he allowed Israel and Judah to reap what they had sown: Oppression, foreign occupation, destruction, exile. Only a tiny remnant continued under the old covenant until the Savior finally came.

In the last 30 years since I bought my first hard drive, technology has advanced in wonderful ways. Not only have computers gotten more powerful and more reliable, but we have technologies like smart phones and Internet that didn't even exist back then. We are learning more about the human genome, and that enables targeted gene therapy for diseases like cancer. Some of the new technologies that are in our hands and on the horizon are really exciting!

But human beings have not changed. Not a bit. The human race is less civilized and more wicked than ever. Society has been teaching kids for decades that they're just animals and just random collections of molecules, that there is no God and no morality, but then when a fistfight breaks out on an airplane because people are so uncivil to each other, or the news is sprinkled with random acts of horrible violence, nobody can explain why. We've been telling people that the evolution of the species depends on survival of the fittest, but then when a kid shoots up a school only a few people can connect the dots and see that it just might be our godless, loveless, immoral, depraved, violent culture that drives such bestial behavior. Now before we start wringing our hands and lamenting all the evil and wickedness in the world, let's remember that we, in our natural selves, are no better. We are naturally equally depraved. If you and I ever start thinking that our sinful nature is not so wicked, just imagine a video of everything you've done, thought, and said. Forget about a lifetime—just think the last 24 hours. How would you like to have that displayed for everyone to see? We would cringe if other people could see what God sees! We would be so embarrassed we would want to run away and hide and never show our face again. Human nature has not changed! There is no denying we deserve God's punishment. We are all sinful and all in need of redemption and healing.

So if the nature of human beings has not changed since the days of Israel and Judah, what has changed? The answer is: the covenant has changed! "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Another word for "covenant" is "testament." In the Bible we find the "Old Testament" (covenant) and the "New Testament." Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus came. Remember what Jesus did on the night he was betrayed? With his disciples in the upper room he took bread and gave them his body to eat, and he took wine and said, "This is my blood of the *new covenant* poured out for you." The new covenant was sealed with blood. It was the blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It was the blood that was offered as payment for the sin of the world when Jesus shed his blood on the cross. And at the heart of this new covenant is God's declaration: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." God continues to be a husband to his covenant people. Jesus is the bridegroom, and the church is his beautiful bride. He has bound himself to us and us to him by a commitment of love and faithfulness. It's not like the power went out, and God lost all the database records he kept of our sins. It's not like God's hard drive crashed. No, God *chooses* to forget our sins. God loved the world, God gave his Son, and God washed our sins away in the blood of Jesus. They are forgiven, and they are forgotten.

Do you have trouble forgetting? Sins you've committed and mistakes you've made? Do you have trouble letting go of guilt and forgetting the pain of the past? Then remember this: God has forgiven, and God has forgotten. You know, God so intensely wants you to know how much you are loved and forgiven that throughout the Bible God uses different pictures to illustrate how he deals with our sins for Jesus' sake. Sometimes he speaks in terms of separation: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Sometimes he speaks in terms of cleansing: "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Sometimes he speaks in terms of covering: "He is the atoning sacrifice" (1 John 2:2). The word "atonement" means "covering." Sometimes he speaks in terms of clothing with righteousness: "All of you who were baptized into Christ has been clothed with Christ" (Galatians 3:26). Today in our text from Jeremiah, God speaks in terms of forgiving and forgetting: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34). God has forgiven, and God has forgotten.

The final fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy will come for us in heaven. The freedom from pain and guilt that we experience in God's forgiveness now is just a taste of the peace and joy that we'll experience in God's presence in heaven when the pain of the past is forever behind us and the regret of sin is forever forgotten, and we bask forever in the peace of forgiveness and the eternal joy of God's love. Until then, we rest in God's new covenant, in which God says, "I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." God has forgiven, and God has forgotten. Amen.