

Have you ever forgotten something? I forget things all the time, I'm always misplacing my keys or leaving an item or two off the grocery list. We all forget little things here and there. It's no big deal. But have you ever forgotten how to do something that you've done over and over? Well it happened to me a few weeks ago...

Every so often, friends will ask me to look over their teenagers' science or math homework. I have a general science degree so, if I have the time, I try to help them out. A couple of weeks ago I was asked to help a young woman work out how to balance some chemical equations but when I looked at the worksheet I suddenly realized that Grade 11 Chemistry was over a decade ago and my brain just isn't used to working that way anymore. I was shocked to discover that I had developed *chemistry amnesia*. It was frustrating to look at problems that were once easy and not even know where to start. Naturally, since I didn't remember how to complete the work, I immediately decided that the teacher was to blame. Clearly, he was expecting far too much from his young students. It couldn't possibly be my fault that the work was too hard for me. Fortunately, *chemistry amnesia* is easily overcome. I pulled out the textbook, reviewed the method, and we were on our way again.

Like chemistry, the maintenance of most skills depends on constant use, constant exercise. I'm sure many of you would agree that not everything is "like riding a bike". Think, for example, of an athlete who must carefully train year-round in order to be in peak condition at the right moment. Or, maybe, you have a second language which you don't use on a regular basis. You will likely find yourself feeling a little rusty, a little slow, to construct phrases with confidence if you don't use it on a regular basis. It's easy to get to the point where we feel as if we have perfected something so we must not need to work as hard at it any more. We get complacent, and then we start to forget. We develop *skills amnesia*.

This happens in our walk with Jesus as well. Although, you might call it more of a *Theological Amnesia*. When things are going really well, it can be easy to fall into just going through the motions of faith instead of really investing in our relationship with Christ. Feeling or needing closeness with God in these times isn't always a priority. Then, when things start to go wrong, we find ourselves struggling. In all of the despair, doubt, and chaos of the world, it can be easy to forget that God moves in and through all situations.

In our Old Testament reading today, Isaiah certainly thinks that the Israelites have forgotten. "Do you not know? Have you not heard?" he asks them. Things aren't going well for Israel. They've been carried off to Babylon, exiled to a foreign land and, understandably, they aren't coping very well. Right in the middle of the text is where we hear Israel's complaint: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel: My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God".

"Our cause is disregarded by our God", they cry out. God has abandoned us, God just doesn't care. Here they are in a strange land, everything they know is destroyed, families are torn apart, and the Israelites feel as if the Great Creator could care less. Maybe some of them wondered if God was really with them at all. They've lost their footing, they've lost their connecting point, suddenly, God is just out there, somewhere, above the circle of the earth. He doesn't seem to be much help to them in their current predicament. *Theological Amnesia*. The Israelites are experiencing theological amnesia and Isaiah knows it. Of course, the Israelites are not the only ones to develop theological amnesia. It seems to be part of the human condition. When things get tough, it can be difficult to see what God is doing.

A couple of years ago I was approached by a woman doing street missions and she handed me a card with the image of a child in the midst of a town which had clearly been disrupted by some violent natural disaster and she asked me "have you ever wondered where God is, in situations like this?" Standing on the street, it was so easy to reply "no, I know that God is there". What I don't know, though, is how I would have felt if I was the child in the photo. I don't know how I would have felt if I was an Israelite in exile.

So what do we do when things get tough? How do we respond when "bad things happen to good people?" What is our reflex emotion when we hear of yet another terror attack, or a cancer diagnosis? What about a job loss? A family crisis? What do we do when our world falls apart? Do we whine? Do we worry in silence? If we get angry, who are we angry at? I got angry at a Chemistry teacher I don't even

know for something which wasn't even his fault. Do we turn our anger towards others? Ourselves? God? Like the exiles returning from Babylon, do we wonder whether God hasn't gone off and left us all together?

This passage isn't about answering the question "why do bad things happen to good people", instead this passage is about us, and about God, and about what God does with us when we are discouraged, disconnected, and generally disheartened by the trouble, chaos, and doubt all around us. This passage is about remembering who God is, and whose we are.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? says Isaiah. Don't you remember?

Even great prophets like Elijah experienced times of great doubt and fear. In 1 Kings 19 we are told of Elijah having a moment of *theological amnesia*. He is running for his life because Jezebel has threatened to kill him. He ends up hiding in a cave and God comes to him saying "what are you doing here Elijah?". Elijah replies "I've done everything you've asked, I've been faithful to you, but now they want to kill me too". And this is the part of the passage that many of us know quite well: God sends Elijah out to the top of the mountain promising that the Lord is about to pass by. There's an earthquake, and a mighty wind, and a great fire, but it isn't there that Elijah finds God's presence. Instead, it is in the still small whisper that Elijah hears the question again "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Have you forgotten that I'm always with you? Have you forgotten what I've called you to do?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? says Isaiah. Don't you remember?

"Do you not know? Have you not heard?" Have you become so overwhelmed by your own suffering that you've forgotten? Don't you remember who created you? Before there was anything, God was there. We are like grasshoppers to the Holy One and yet he knows each of us by name.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard?" Not only is God *transcendent*, the mighty creator over all things, but God is also *immanent*. God is the one who comes close to us, he does not grow tired or weary. In fact, the Holy One comes alongside us giving power to the weak and strength to the worn down.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard?" Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will rise up on wings as eagles. They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Truly, our hope is in the Lord, who is with us even now in exile and who is also bringing us out. Isaiah proclaims hope to the Israelites. He reminds them of God's presence with them and he promises an end to the exile. This is part of our memory too. God's presence among his people reminds us of who he is. The Old Testament is part of our story too and it points to God's constant desire for relationship with us.

Our experience of faith is very much impacted by memory. It's based on past experiences. Like I suggested earlier, it is like a muscle or skill which needs ongoing care and exercise. When things are going really well we start to forget to give thanks for everyday blessings. We start to forget that we are fully reliant on God. When things get hard, our reflex is to stress out, to lash out, to worry instead of turning to the One who is always there.

Even now as we start to look towards Lent and the journey to Easter we are reminded that God is not content to be a distant Holy Being. In Jesus Christ we know of God's presence with us. In his death and resurrection the barriers to relationship with God are removed, if we let them be.

Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Don't you remember who God is?

When you are overcome by stress and grief and fear, when the earthquakes, the fires, and the winds of life are too much to handle, God is still here with us. God still wants to come close to us. God is whispering to us "remember who I am, remember I am with you". God isn't content to just be the Holy One seated above the circle of the earth. God seeks that intimate connection with us just like he had with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Don't you know? Haven't you heard? "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen