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Waterford Mennonite Church
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"Remember that you were slaves …"

Greetings to all of you here today, and to those listening at a distance now or later through recording. I especially welcome you as we talk this month about citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. As I reflected on the scriptural themes from the convention in Phoenix, my mind kept going to a phrase from the Old Testament, actually repeated a number of times in the book of Deuteronomy. (Would you stand, if able, for the reading of God's word.)

Deuteronomy 16:10-14 [10] Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. [11] And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you. [12] Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees. [13] Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. [14] Be joyful at your Fe—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns.

(May the Spirit of God add blessing to the reading of the Word. You may be seated.)

Here in Deuteronomy, Moses is giving commands regarding worship and celebration. The two feasts mentioned here are harvest celebrations. These worship celebrations are to be reminders that it is God who is the giver and nurturer of life, and somehow, remembering where they have collectively come from is an important element in obeying the commands of God.

Last Sunday, by the way, the children were talking about this Feast of Tabernacles, or Festival of Booths, or Tents, as it is variously described—*sukkot* as it is called in Hebrew. (PowerPoint picture of children in shelters on the lawn)

Other "Remember" references in Deuteronomy:

- Deut 5:15—observing the Sabbath.
- Deut 15:15—generosity to fellow Hebrews who had become servants and about to be released at the end of seven years.
- Deut 16:10-14—the scripture we read about worship and celebration.
- Deut 24:18-24—justice for aliens and orphans; generosity in caring for the poor.

What does it mean to remember for us? Let me share a story to illustrate.

The year was around 1830, about the time that Goshen became a town. The place, Germany. A family council was in session. We don't know much about the discussion that took place, but we do know that Germany had seen years of war. France under Napoleon had ruled Germany for a time, but Napoleon had met his Waterloo, and Germany was again trying to establish some sort of central rule. Military conscription was the order of the day, and for this nonresistant Amish family with six young sons, that was a problem. What could be done? The family was poor, and could not afford travel to the New World, where some of their friends had found refuge. At last a decision was made. The oldest son of the couple would travel to America, work as an indentured servant to pay for his passage, then work to fund a brother's passage, and hopefully, at some point the rest of the family could follow. So in 1830, young Wilhelm Bender, only 15 years old at the time, found himself near Baltimore, Md., working for a man who owned a nursery and who had paid his passage across the Atlantic. When Amish Bishop Benedict Miller in Somerset County, Pa. (just across the state line from Grantsville, Md.) heard about the young Amish boy in Baltimore, he began making plans to go and pay the balance required for his work and bring him back to the community there. Benedict's daughter Catharine said at the time, "That boy may become a husband for one of us."

Young Wilhelm worked hard, and a few years later was able to provide funds for his younger brother Joseph to come to this country. The two of them worked, and 12 years after Wilhelm arrived in Maryland, the two of them sent for the rest of the family to come. By this time Wilhelm was married, to Catharine Miller, to be sure, and a young calf was set aside to be the feast in celebration of the family's arrival. The planned day came and went, and the family didn't show up. Finally, they decided to kill the calf and find another means of celebration when, and if, the family arrived. Late that day Wilhelm looked up to see people walking from the direction of the Old National Trail (Route 40). They looked like they could be his family, but one person was missing. Only after their arrival did Wilhelm learn that his father had died in Germany shortly before the family was to travel to the New World. His mother Elizabeth and four younger brothers were penniless and hungry. They had walked the 27 miles from Cumberland, Md., in the previous two days. At the end of the first day, they had stopped and asked a family if they could sleep in their barn. The people asked them if they had any food. They replied, "None that day." Later the family brought potatoes and bread out to the barn. The Benders ate the potatoes and saved the bread for the next day. The next morning, they ate the bread, then spent the rest of the day walking to the home of young Wilhelm, my great-great-grandpa.

Today, if you visit Spruce Forest Artisan Village, you can see the log home built by Benedict Miller and his son Joel in 1835, a few years after Wilhelm arrived. My guess is that Wilhelm, about 20 years old at the time, probably helped build this house. (PowerPoint picture of Miller house)

What must it have been like for Wilhelm's father Daniel to make that decision to send his young son across the ocean to the unknown New World? No web-cam, no telephone, not even telegraph. His decision can only be understood in the context of poverty, desperation, and a strong faith in God.

Today, many similar family councils are taking place. Some are happening in Syria, as people try to figure out how to protect their families from the violence that is destroying so many lives there. Some are happening in Mexico, where violence or grinding poverty inspires dreams of freedom and opportunity across the river in El Norte. No matter what one's political persuasion or perspective on immigration, we do well to remember our own stories. Lyle will be addressing this specific issue more directly in a couple weeks.

The Wilhelm Bender story is just one story from my family. There are many, many more that I know nothing of. All of you have related stories, both personal and familial, that remind you of where you came from. Reflect for just a moment on the range of stories that are part of our collective national history—from persecuted Anabaptists to Irish peasants surviving the potato famine, from the Puritans in Massachusetts to the poor convicts sent to penal colonies in Georgia, from First Nation people surviving the European invasions to Cambodians fleeing the "Killing Fields," to Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

Our family has had the rare privilege to be together this past week. One of the remembered family instructive lines was "Remember who you *are*." That's a valuable reminder, but we also do well to "Remember who you *were*."

Just as remembering their past of slavery was important for Israel, remembering our family past has importance.

But for our focus on being citizens of heaven, it is even more important for us to remember what we were spiritually. We were all slaves to sin!

I see at least three functions of remembering for the people of Israel, and for us as well.

First, the reality of the past is to remind Israel that they belong to God, not only because of creation, but also as a result of deliverance from slavery. In different ways God kept reminding the Israelites that they belonged to him. Remembering our spiritual past and the deliverance we experience through Jesus should give us a positive sense of obligation to God, of being "bought with a price," and therefore not our own bosses.

A second function of remembering is to encourage a sense of gratitude. The harvest festivals of Israel reminded them that not only had God delivered them from slavery, but also he continued to bless and sustain them through the provision of good harvests. In a similar way, remembering what Jesus has done for us, and what he continues to do, should give us a spirit of gratitude and joy.

Finally, remembering their past in slavery was to give Israel an understanding of grace, and the motivation to extend it to others. Because they had been strangers in a foreign land, and because they had experienced the grinding toll of forced hard labor, they were to be kind to strangers and sensitive to the physical needs of aliens and fellow Israelites as well.

And what about the church, the spiritual Israel? Remembering our spiritual bondage in sin and the freedom brought by Jesus should make us the most gracious people on earth. Unfortunately, we know that the church is not always known for extending grace to other sinners. As was the case with Israel, the church often assumes an attitude of superiority and exclusivity. Too often, we have forgotten that we were slaves!

Ephesians 2 describes what Jesus did for us on the cross—saving us from our sin, and making us part of the people of God, citizens of heaven. In an Anabaptist perspective, of course, Jesus not only saves us, but also shows us how to live as citizens of his kingdom. I look forward to hearing Cindy develop this theme next Sunday.

The New Testament uses “remembering” language similar to that of Deuteronomy. Encourage a look at Paul’s use of such “remembering” language in the book of I Corinthians. Chapter 1, Remember that not many wealthy or wise or powerful are called; God uses weak things (chapter 6). Between instructions about not taking believers to court and commands regarding sexual purity, Paul reminds the Corinthians of who they were—sinners—before coming to faith.

Let’s remember who we are, and who we were!