What an honor is to celebrate with you on this 55th Church Anniversary and to see our brothers and sisters achieve the distinctive mark of being members of this congregation for 50 years. (Some of you were not even born when they joined this church!) We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses that reminds us of commitment and dedication. Because of your witness, you helped build a legacy that has brought us here. To that, I say, “Glory to God!”

Now, any anniversary celebration is built on looking back and recalling memories of where we have been. We do this to see what we have been through and what has brought us here. So, to celebrate appropriately, be grateful for our present, and continue to dream about our future, we need to look back to the past.

However, looking back is hard. We are afraid or resist looking at the past because of the memory of hard seasons, broken hearts, and difficult moments when our faith was so stretched out that we thought we would not make it.

Still, when we look back, we have the power to reflect and assess where we have been to better understand where God is calling us forward. Sometimes we may cringe and weep, but with a proper perspective based on God’s love, we can find joy and be grateful for what it was because it makes us who we are today. And this is a source of confidence that gives us clarity and emboldens our resilience.

So, please think of this Anniversary Sunday as an opportunity to remember with gratitude where we have come from so we can move forward confidently. That is why we have recognized our people, heard stories from them, and celebrated their unwavering commitment to God and the church.

Now, I know the past can be brutal sometimes, for it often reminds us of how we looked or what we did (pictures on the screen. Is that a mugshot, Terry?). Still, there is no better teacher than an honest one, right?

How does the Bible speak to us about this, looking back to go forward? For this, I want to share a text from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8:1-10,

“The entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know, then, in your heart that, as a parent disciplines a child, so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.”

Moses wrote this book, which is the fifth in the Bible and a part of the Torah, the sacred Hebrew Scriptures. In it, he details the message of God to the Israelites and tells the story of their actions and choices as they are ready to enter the Promised Land. Though they had been wandering through the scorching desert for forty years, God provided for all their needs by eating bread from heaven and drinking water from rocks, even giving them clothes that did not wear out, and keeping their feet strong so that they did not swell.

But before they entered the Promised Land to establish themselves in their forever home, God wanted them to remember that they wandered in the desert for forty years due to the negligence of their parents and theirs to listen to God.

We can see this when Moses asks them, “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments…” “Keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land…”

Why is Moses doing this? Just ask the question: What happens to someone who forgets where the blessings come from? They become spoiled, entitled, and ungrateful, and soon they demand blessings as a right rather than being grateful for them as a gift. This is why Moses was reminding them where they had come from so they would recognize and celebrate the presence and blessings of God in their lives as a gift. Before moving into a new, amazing, and blessed place, they needed to remember all that God had done for them to appreciate the gift they were about to receive. They needed to realize that God was fulling his promise even against their many setbacks as long as they kept walking in God’s ways. This is the same principle of Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

The same is true for us. We need to look back so we can clearly see how God helped us get through the discouragement of shame, the ache of disappointment, and times of difficulty. Of course, looking back can also remind us of what we have gained and lost, which could be traumatic, depending on what it is. Still, we can acknowledge that we have made it this far because of God’s grace. Looking at some moments in our past can make us say, “There is no way I made it out without God’s help.” That is the gift of remembering and knowing that God has provided us in ways we could never even understand or knew at the time. By remembering, we can even see how God sent people to us to get us out of the pit more times than we can count. But we can only appreciate all that if we look back.

Think of it this way: when we recall our memory is like seeing a Photo Album. We remember how we used to look, the things we did, the high and low moments in our lives, and the gift of relieving the happy times. And as we keep turning the pages, there is a flood of memories that may bring nostalgia but also make us realize how “lucky” we are.

I do not know if this happens to you, but when I look at the past, I remember how blessed I was and am now. As I look at my “Photo Album,” I remember defining moments in which God was real, able, good, and generous to me. Looking back helps me appreciate how I am still going forward with God despite the setbacks. If anything, those setbacks were a gift that made me stronger. And as I move forward, my hope enlarges and brightens because by remembering I know a little more and better who God is and what he does.

This is what Moses was doing by reminding them how God kept the promise of his blessing upon them and never left them to stumble through the challenges alone. But how could they know if they did not look back?

My friends, the point of looking back is not to leave us stuck in the past but to remember that, no matter how bumpy the road has been, the Giver of good gifts has shared every step and has propelled us with renewed confidence into our future.

Here is the invitation and good news: As you look back, readjust your vision, correct patterns in your life, set healthy goals and direction for your future, and, most importantly, realize God’s faithfulness and grab strongly on him.

And the good news is that God always fulfills his promises of blessings when we remain on his path.

So, just as Moses encouraged God’s people before they traded the searing sand of the wilderness for the long-awaited soil of the Promised Land, let us too, move forward keeping God’s Word in us not only for our blessing but for those that will continue after us.