Fall is a time of remembering and returning to who we are in faith. Let us pray.

Did anyone do anything fun on your summer vacation? That question is being asked in classrooms across the country this week. For many of us, summer was a break in our schedule. It meant trips to different destinations and opportunities to try something different. After Labor Day we settle back to what we remember and what is familiar. As a child I used to enjoy coming back to school because I enjoyed reconnecting with friends and to routines. Fall would be a time of remembering activities and clubs and sports in my communities. After being away at camp over the summer, I enjoyed returning to the patterns of fall. Now I watch my children get on the school bus to spend their first weeks in class and I remember my own experiences.

There is a lot of focus on animals now a-days in my family. My children love animals. The girls pretend to be elephants with their arms as trunks. I learned recently how elephants hold up their 10,000 pounds of weight on their bones and joints, lining them up in sound columns. The key is water. Elephants can drink 50 gallons of water per day to support those bones. Without the water, their bones become dry.

Elephants aren’t born knowing how to draw in all that water, however. They struggle bending down to drink from ponds, so a young elephant must learn to draw water up its trunk like a straw and pour it into its mouth. A young calf has to watch its parents to learn how to draw in what it needs for life.

Once they learn, though, they say they never forget. Of all animals, experts say that elephants have the best memories. They will remember animals and people who they haven't seen for many months. Scientists even posit that there are elephant graveyards where bones are collected and where elephants consciously remember their dead.

We humans have pretty good memories but need to be reminded of things from time to time. There is a story of a couple who were having problems remembering things, so their doctor told them to start writing things down. Later that night the man got up from his chair to go to the kitchen. His wife asked, "Will you get me a bowl of chocolate ice cream?" "Sure," he replied. She then asked him, "Don’t you think you should write it down so you can remember it?" He said, "No, I can remember that." A few minutes later the man returned and handed her a plate of pancakes. His wife said, “Honey, I told you you should have written it down, you forgot the maple syrup.”

Parents with young children talk about getting parental amnesia as we forget things. Not too long ago a member of my family got to the front of the check-out line at Whole Foods only to find that they had forgotten to bring their wallet. Have you ever done that? No credit card, no
Like elephants, humans have routines to help us remember things. It’s why Joshua called the Israelite tribes to create a memorial after they crossed the Jordan. Why as we approach the anniversary of September 11, 2001 we now are in the habit of remembering those who lost their lives at the Pentagon, in Pennsylvania and in New York. Why as we begin fall at Bradley Hills we renew our commitment to education, music and the routines that mark our faith. And why our scriptures this morning are about the people of God remembering who they are in faith.

In the 37th chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet helps Israel remember its identity through a well-known passage called the “Valley of the Dry Bones.” In it, Ezekiel is transported in a vision by God’s spirit to a valley graveyard full of the bones of his people. The dry bones represented the dry faith of the Israelites. Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, Babylonians captured Jerusalem, the city of David, destroyed the Jewish temple of Solomon and took around 10,000 Israelites back to Babylon. There the Israelites missed home. They missed their city. They missed worshipping in their Temple. They missed the familiar signs of their God. What sustained them in Babylon were the memories and routines that they brought with them. Memories of how they had worshipped back home. As time passed, so did the memories. And the Israelites began to lose their faith, passion and hope as a result. They became like dry bones.

In the deserts of the arid Middle East, the people knew dryness in significant ways. We had some of that dryness represented by the dessert box in Covenant Hall this morning. The people knew what the elephants experienced, that when one lacks water, one’s bones can dry out. In the Bible, God’s messengers associated water with life by contrast. The prophet Isaiah wrote a few centuries before Ezekiel that God’s people worshipped a God who poured water on the thirsty land. Jesus proclaims in several places in John’s Gospel that, Whoever drinks of the water that I give him or who believes will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life…and their heart will overflow with living water.

Notice in the Biblical passages, that life is already embedded in God’s creation. God doesn’t just quench their thirst, God makes that which seems dry or lifeless the source of life for someone else for the future. The water or spirit helps the creation reconnect with the sacred already inside it. The water activates the seeds inside the ground so the spring of water wells up to life and so the heart can produce rivers of living water that don’t end. What God is doing in Ezekiel is reconstructing the body part by part, to remind us that life is always within the bones, building on what is already there. The spark of divine fire never totally goes out. We just have to look at things differently and remember who we are.

Old Testament scholar Karthryn Darr explains in the New Interpreter’s Bible discussion and analysis of Ezekiel that that is the beauty of Ezekiel. We ask the question of Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” In Ezekiel, not on their own. “But look through God’s eyes and see the bones rush to their appropriate partners” and skin appear. Watch as God’s spirit infuse them with life. Can corpses get up from their graves? Of course not. But look through God’s eyes and see them rise up, much as Jesus later would. Can the people of Bradley Hills live with renewed spirit after a
long hard week of staring at our computers, our work documents, our children’s homework, our medicine bottle labels, our frustrated friends. Yes, when through worship we look at ourselves and our lives through a new set of eyes, as God would. Then even people who feel isolated can remember what they were and can be still.

Within each of us there is life, no matter how hurting or lonely or tired we might be. There is a wonderful children’s story one of you reminded me of recently called Maxie by Mildred Kantrowitz. Maxie is an older woman who lives with her cat and bird in a city apartment. She does the same things every day at the same time but starts to feel lonely and unimportant. Her life is dry and boring. Unbeknownst to her, however, most of the people around her have come to rely on her. They even tell time by Maxie’s actions. So when Maxie’s spirits sink and she doesn't bother to get out of bed one morning to open her blinds, get the milk from outside, let the cat out and make her tea in the whistling pot, all the neighbors and mailman are thrown off schedule and become worried. They all go up to Maxie's apartment until there are dozens of people waiting by her door. When she didn't answer the door they call a doctor, worried because Maxie is still in bed. The doctor examines Maxie and comes out of her bedroom to announce that Maxie isn't really sick; she's just lonely and doesn't feel needed.

Maxie is amazed to find all her neighbors wondering where she was and they tell her how they depend on her to keep their schedules. Maxie is reminded that she is needed and from then on she is happy then to get up and keep her routine from then on! Maxie had to remember herself, her routines, and that what she does matters. Just as the Israelites had to remember the routines of their faith when they felt lonely in Babylon.

You might be in a dry period in some part of your life. You might feel in exile from a person you care about. You might have lost momentum in your career or hope in a relationship. It might be a time in life where you are in a valley. And the message of Ezekiel, the hope of the church, the mission of Jesus Christ, is that there is living water flowing in your soul for we each have much life to remember and we still have faith to live. Fall is a perfect time to reconnect to and renew that part of your life.

Maybe you have not been to church in a while. Perhaps you have been gone a good deal this summer. It could be you need a reminder that life can be renewed. Like Maxie, maybe more people may depend on you than you realize.

Each fall at church we try and remember the spirit within us. This morning we begin our fall program year, a time when people who might have been on travel or busy this summer return to church. When we as they body of Christ are re-membered. Building on a great summer here. Some of us have to set our alarms to remember we have an 8:30 service. That adult education and children’s education is at 9:15. That the second service is at 1030. That choir rehearsal returns.

I find that the greatest value to changing patterns and schedules is that they help us remember who we are in faith. They reconnect us with the ideas that we just know; that we just remember, although we cannot tell where they came from, that sustain us when life is devoid of spirit and can save us when we feel lonely or in exile. Traditions handed down in our families. Lessons
from the Bible we learned in Sunday school. Prayers we learned as children that help us as adults.

I cannot tell you when as a child I learned the Lords’ Prayer. But I can tell you that during some tense and scary moments as an adult that remembering that prayer has helped me. I cannot tell you what happened during my baptism on February 8, 1970, just as Mary Rose won’t either. But when she grows up and watches baptisms in the greater church, she’ll connect to the sacrament because she has gone through it too. Just as you and I reconnect as the body of Christ when we say as part of our liturgy, “let us remember our baptism,” even if we were infants and too young then for us to remember now. It’s the routines that help us remember and connect to our faith.

And so remember who you are in faith. A child of the covenant. Made in God’s image. Called to life in the Spirit. Saved by Jesus Christ. Pulled together into a family of faith. Given new vision for the future by the breath of the Almighty. Let that knowledge sustain you when you feel weary and your bones seem dry. For God is the source of the living water flowing in and from your heart. God is the one who has always loved you. For you just know that in your bones. Thanks be to God. Amen.