

“STAYING WITH JESUS”

Psalm 40:1-11, John 1:29-42 January 15th, 2017

Today we are going to be focused on the stories we tell—the stories of our lives—we all have a bunch of them—and on telling the stories of Jesus. We will begin with one by The Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor who besides being a pastor is also a avid bird watcher who lives in Virginia. She writes: One Saturday while driving on a busy city highway, my daughter and I saw an unusual bird. It was some sort of falcon, with sharp, black eyes, and that unmistakable meat-eating beak. Caught at a stop light, like good bird watchers, we started calling out what we saw. “Cheek spots! Speckled breast! Brown sides!” Then the light changed.

It was at least an hour before we finished our errands and got back home where we could look in the bird book. By then, our memories of what we had seen differed from each other just enough that we couldn’t agree. I thought I had seen the white-spotted sides of a kestrel, but a kestrel has a blue back, and Rorie absolutely insisted that there was no blue. The back was all brown, which would make the bird a merlin, another little falcon. Unfortunately, female kestrels and merlins both have brown backs. Both species can be found in the area in winter, and both thrive in either the countryside or the city. In other words, the possibilities were open.

Whatever it was, it was marvelous! So alive, perched right next to the highway on top of a street sign, diving onto a little grassy island, scarfing up birds and mice. As far as I was concerned, seeing that falcon was like looking up to see a Bengal tiger sitting on the traffic island.

When we lived in the South, my family liked to go on vacation to the Gulf in Alabama, and on one of these vacations we saw a scissor-tailed flycatcher.

It's a rare visitor from South America with pale yellow-green feathers and a very, very long, narrow V-shaped tail-like a pair of scissors lying open on a table. It was resting in the long grass by a state park road looking exotic and tired. We knew it had come across the Gulf, and this was perhaps the only chance we'd ever have to see it. We had been in the park exploring an old fort, and during the morning all four of us took turns taking each other by the hand leading each other back to the road again to look at the flycatcher.

Since I am only a casual bird-watcher, I have to take Rev. Taylor's word for it that if you are a bird-watcher, just seeing the bird isn't enough. You have to tell somebody about it. And that's especially true if all you get is a glimpse. That's why seeing the rare flycatcher when we were all together was so wonderful. We talk about it every now and then.

There is bound to be something else we just have to tell someone about. How many times have you heard a group of people who have all seen the same play in the same ball game tell each other exactly what they saw? They might do it immediately right in the stands or during the commercial or the next day at work or at the post office. It's not just sharing information or confirming that the other person saw what you saw. That's not why people re-tell plays in a great game or describe a wonderful sight. Telling is experiencing. Telling is having the experience again and giving it to someone else. Telling is shining a light that shows a particular way and then walking that way together.

That's why death is always a time for story telling, for sitting down together as a family and remembering the night when Dad stopped the train in New Jersey where the train hadn't stopped in 35 years. He showed somebody his Naval Academy ring and used his charm, which had been his greatest asset all his

life, and the train stopped in that town that night for the first time in memory because Dad wanted to get off there. When you tell a story like that one in your family room or in the kitchen, you can look at the faces of the children there, hearing about a relative they've never met, and you can tell what they are wondering. They are wondering how they are going to turn out—now that they know it's possible to turn out to be the kind of person who can stop a train with a smile.

Sometimes our stories are very personal ones about our lives that we don't share casually or with just any one. Rev. Dawn Chesser tells about the time her son asked some very personal questions about her life of faith. He asked, "Why are you a Christian, Mom? And why are you a Methodist?" This was from her twenty-year old son who had come home in the spring for a visit. How would we answer that?!?!?

She responded this way: I have to admit that at first I was taken aback. How could he not know the answer? I mean, this is a young man who for the first eighteen years of his life spent every Sunday morning in church listening to me preach, and whose entire circle of support came from relationships he made through church, and whose mother and grandfather are both United Methodist ministers! Besides, he might have been on vacation, but for me it was a work day, and I was busy trying to write sermon notes. I didn't have time for a conversation about faith.

But I made time. I stopped what I was doing, and for the first time, I talked to my son about my faith in a deeply personal way. We talked about faith for a couple of hours that day. I told him that, in part, I was a Christian and a Methodist because of the family I was born into. But at some point in my life, it became more than that, and I made a personal decision to be a disciple of Jesus

Christ. I told him I loved Jesus. I told him I believed that in Jesus we see the very nature and person of God. I told him about an experience I had when I was working as a chaplain in which I felt deep in my heart that I had come face to face with the living Lord. I told him that this encounter had changed my life. I told him that for me, there was nothing more important I could do with my life than follow Jesus. My faith in Christ is the center of my being. It is who I am. I then explained in great detail why I found The United Methodist Church to be the best context for me to practice my discipleship.

Our readings today are about the calling to be tellers, to go and tell others your story of who God is. The Psalm for today says, “Tell the glad news of deliverance, speak of God’s steadfast love.” The Gospel reading is a whole sequence of people telling each other they have seen Jesus and who they think Jesus is. It begins with John telling about Jesus’ baptism. As the story opens, John is talking about himself. The details are very precise. Twice he says, “I did not know him.” As soon as he recognizes Jesus, John goes from “I did not know him” to making public announcements that “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Here is the one I was sent to proclaim: “the Son of God.”

Then almost the very same thing happens again. The day after the baptism, John tells two of his disciples that Jesus is “the lamb of God,” and what did they do? They run off after Jesus. They want to see for themselves. They catch up and have an odd conversation with Jesus, and then Andrew runs off and finds his brother Peter and brings him to meet Jesus too. When Jesus meets Peter, Jesus gives him a new name, “Rock.” Peter will do so much telling that he’ll be a foundation on which the church will be built. To read this story is to get caught up in the cycle of listening, telling, and re-telling that is the story of discipleship.

Why are stories of meeting this man Jesus told again and again? One answer has to do with going back to the middle of what we heard today in John, to the point where two men, who have no names yet, are running after a man on the street, pointed out by someone else.

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks the two disciples. Now, “What are you looking for?” is a fairly strange question when you think about it. The logical question would be, “What do you want?” Maybe this isn’t a story about what people want. The word for staying and remaining in Greek is the same word—*meno*—and it’s used in this story five times very quickly in a row. Twice John says the Spirit came to Jesus and remained. The two disciples asked, “Where are you staying?” They go and see “where he was staying and they stayed with him that day.”

Remain. Remain. Stay. Stay. Stay.

Could this story be telling us something the disciples don’t know yet themselves? What people are looking for is not information, answers to questions such as “Who is Jesus?” or “Is this the one?” or “Am I right about this church business?” Not even the answer to the question of why stories of meeting this man have captured the human heart for generations.

What we are all looking for without even knowing it is a place to stay, a place to remain always. Jesus is that place, a person who is himself a home, a place to belong, a whole way of life. Jesus knows that what the disciples really want is a place to belong. Whatever he sees on the faces of these two men panting in front of him after running down the street, whatever he sees, what he says to them is just right and wonderfully inviting: “Come and see.” They do go with him. They end up staying, and his story becomes their way of life.

The poet and Christian author Kathleen Norris moved to the plains of

South Dakota, where her family had lived and had deep roots. One day she had a conversation in a tavern with an old cowboy, who sought her out because she was from “one of the old families.” He wanted to tell her about a side saddle he owned, made by his great grandfather as a wedding present some 150 years ago. She tells of how they mused awhile on the subject of their ancestors, when suddenly the old man said, “Who are we and where do we come from?” That’s the real question, isn’t it? Before Norris could reply, he smiled and said, “And here we are telling each other lies.” “Stories!” she said, laughing. “Call them stories!” “Stories!” he nearly shouted back, pounding one hand on the bar. “That’s who we are!”

Do you remember the story of the flycatcher at the beginning of this message? Rev. Taylor adds something about that story: When we were down at the beach that spring, we didn’t spot the flycatcher by ourselves. Someone told us it was there. If they hadn’t, there’s a chance we might not have seen it at all. There were other people walking along with binoculars in the park that day. They were the ones who told us about the flycatcher and exactly where along the road it was resting. And so we went and looked at it and marveled.

In closing let me share another person’s story, this time as a poem by Scott Barton:

What’s in a name?

This is another text brimming with names,
“Here is the Lamb of God,” the Baptist claims:
Then it’s not long until “Lamb,” is, “the Son!”
Thinking of these, I then wonder, “Which one?”
Lamb of God? Son of God? Which will it be?

Maybe there is a progression to see?
But ,two disciples of John start with this—
“Rabbi” they say (although not with a kiss!)
Then it’s not long ‘til “Messiah” he’s called!
Don’t get attached t one name above all,
John (the Evangelist) here seems to say;
Jesus is more than just one sobriquet-
Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah or Lamb,
Jesus is surely, “I am who I am!”
You and I, too, aren’t just stuck in one place,
“Simon” can quickly be “Cephas,” by grace;
Maybe it just all depends where you are—
What you are called-when, what matters, by far;
You are inscribed on the walls of God’s heart,
Brimming with love, which for you, won’t depart.

“What are you looking for?” says Jesus to people who were told by someone else where he could be found. “Come and see,” he said to people who wondered if they had a place in his story. The thing that moves people from one question to the other, from “What are you looking for?” to “Come and see” is the story the church has been called to tell. It’s the only story the church has to tell, the story of its home, the place from which we draw hope and strength and power. That place is a person, and the best way to tell his story—perhaps the only way—is with our lives.

Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God, our beginning and end, no matter where we are, help us to remain yours. If we are far from our best selves just now, whatever the reason, hold us close so we can remember our home in you. Remind those who are far removed that nothing, not even death, can bring an end to your forgiveness and love. Comfort those who mourn, protect the weak in ways they can discern, even if others cannot. Surprise the smug and confuse those who are certain about you, just enough to open them to newness. We give you thanks for signs of home around us, anything that makes us feel a moment of belonging to another person or place. And hear our silent prayers for whatever lies closest on our hearts, for we ask in the name of the person place, The Son you gave to make us your own, Jesus Christ. Amen.