

## “TELLING OUR STORIES”

Psalm 66:8-20 May 17, 2020

How many of you remember singing “I Love to Tell the Story, ‘twill be my theme in glory”? It’s a favorite of mine and probably a favorite of many of you, too. At one point some of the hymnals tried to change “‘twill” replacing it with “I’ll sing this theme in glory”. But it wasn’t the same and the change didn’t stick for most of us!! Twice the singer of this Psalm invites the congregation to pay attention to a story he has to tell. First, the psalmist invites listeners to “come and see what God has done,” (verse 5) and then he tells what God has done for God’s people. Second, the psalmist invites the congregation to “Come and hear... let me tell you what he has done for me”. (verse 16).

We have been hearing a lot about testing lately in many different forms all relating to how we need to be getting through this pandemic. I would like for you to shift gears for a few moments to a different kind of testing—God’s testing.

Psalm 66 is a great psalm of thanksgiving, and it can even point to joy. In many ways, it is a true celebration of the goodness of God—except for that pesky bit about being tested. Our assigned text starts so well: “Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.” Wonderful!!! It is a hymn to the presence and protection of God, who guards us from the hazards of living, keeps us on our feet on the path of righteousness. But then it takes a turn in the very next verse: “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” Wait, what? The same God who kept our feet from slipping now tests us? It gets worse: “You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water...” Um. Really? Protector God?

Certainly, we can imagine our lives being caught up in all those things. We’ve been through fire; we’ve been through water; we’ve had people riding over our heads more often than we’d like to admit. We’ve even had our moments where we felt trapped by anything and everything. So, it isn’t necessarily the content of the struggles that gives us pause; it is the fact that God is the author of our pain. “For you, O God, have tested us.” So, let’s talk about testing.

What do we imagine when we read what the psalmist writes? What comes to mind when we want to talk about the test God gives to us? For many, it means a somewhat arbitrary bolt from above where the old man with a long beard decides on a whim to afflict us with some sort of test. God just draws our name out of the divine hat or closes the holy eyes and rests a glowing finger on a name in the book of life or something. “It’s our turn,” we think. Maybe we did something to deserve it, or maybe it was simply random. Either way, it seems a vengeful or impulsive God who would do such things.

What if the psalmist has simply reported on the struggles that had been encountered? What if it was just a catalog of difficulty? We would have sympathized and seen the common humanity, the path of shadow and suffering and known what it was like to walk with such a burden. But when you add in that activity of God, it now seems like punishment.

This isn’t how the psalmist saw it, however. The psalmist was simply providing a catalog of events. But the world view of the writer is that nothing happens without God having agency. It isn’t written with a sense of frustration or anger; it’s just cataloged and noted that God is a part of what has happened. So, there is no incongruity in the mind of the psalmist to speak of a God who doesn’t let our feet slip at the same time as a God who brings us into the net. We would say, “Stuff happens” with the same state of mind that the psalmist says, “God sent

stuff.”

Yet, it is a test, not just stuff. It is not a test for God to see whether we will be faithful, but a test so that we can see whether we will be faithful, but a test so that we can see whether we will be faithful. God doesn't need a test to know our hearts; we do. God isn't examining us but giving us the means by which we can live out our faith. Everything that happens is a test, and we rise to the occasion by responding as if we belong to God.

Straying a little from the core message, we often talk about the test as difficulties that we have to struggle through. And certainly those are tests; the negative medical report, the loss of a loved one, or of a job, a financial crisis, a relationship in trouble. All these and more are often seen as testing our faith. We need to include, however, the good things on the list as well. Bishop William Willimon, in a sermon to clergy, once declared that we ought to respond to good news from a member of our congregation with, “I'll be right there!” or “I'll be praying for you!” “I just got a promotion.” -----“I'll be right there.” “I just got a raise.” -----“I'll be praying for you.”

The good things we encounter are just as much a test of our faith as are the negative things. Will we continue to honor God in this time of good fortune? Will we be humble when the applause comes? Will we be faithful when we move to the top floor? Life is a test of faith.

When we are moved to give our testimony, the question is not, “Have things happened in your life?” Because things always happen, for good or ill. The question is rather, “Where have you seen God at work in and through you?” The psalms are our guide here. As tragic as the story might be, and high as the emotions might run, it always returns (almost always) to praise. “Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed steadfast love from me” (66:16). It's in the telling of our story, our faith story, that we engage in building up the body. We participate in making disciples.

Faith isn't just for us. That's part of the test. You notice the psalmist speaks in plurals. You have tried *us*, not me. You have brought *us* into the net, you laid burdens on *our* backs: us, our. There is corporality to faith. There is an *us*, not so much a *me* or rather the *me* that God wants me to be is a me in us. And that us is as wide as the world. The prophetic image is one of the whole world streaming to the mountain of the Lord.

Our calling as followers of Christ is not just to keep ourselves on the path, but to invite others to walk the same path we walk—the path of the one chosen and precious.

“Chosen and precious” refers to the one chosen for us and precious in God's eyes. But now, because of the Resurrection, that phrase includes us. We are chosen and precious in Christ. A consequence of being chosen is that God is at work in our lives in good times and in difficult times. I have treasured the stories you share with me—both preCOVID-19 and postCOVID-19. These are your stories of faith, of how God is working in your lives as a disciple in training. The ability to discern God at work in our lives is a part of growth in grace, which is why we need to practice this discernment in the body on a regular basis.

Today I would like to give you a personal, special invitation to share your stories in response to the guiding question, “How is God working in your life right now??” or maybe a more specific question as, “How was God helping your through your illness, or grief, or tragedy?” I ask you to respond to this question through a phone call, a text, an email or a card. “How is God working in your life right now??” Please share with me as soon as you can and let me know if your response is to be kept confidential or if you give me permission to share it—either by name or anonymously. You are “chosen and precious” and I would love to hear your stories!!! We are the Family of Faith here in Pine Bluffs, the Body of Christ here in our community and sharing our stories is such a blessing to us all.

That said, I will share something that happened just a few hours ago as I was working here in my study on this message. I went to bed last night wondering

what the answer would be to my problem. George and I have been waiting for a surgical procedure to remove his cancer on his cheek. It was scheduled to be done this Monday and after waiting over two months we are both anxious to “get it done” as George would put it. But then Tuesday I got an email telling me that he would have to have a COVID-19 test 48-72 hours before the surgery or it wouldn’t happen. I checked in with our clinic here in town and Stitches Urgent Care in Cheyenne and they were not able to help because he doesn’t have symptoms of the virus. There wasn’t any way we could get to that white tent in Denver in the middle of a parking lot to get the test done. So I was prepared to call and cancel Monday’s appointment and try to figure out another date. I felt so helpless and like I was letting George down in keeping him safe and I turned to prayer for the Lord’s help. I certainly didn’t have an answer but I knew that He did!!!

Then when I got over to the church this morning I had a call from the doctor’s office confirming George’s appointment for Monday. I told her my tale of woe and it turns out I had mixed up information about Monday with information another doctor’s office was sending me about my rescheduled colonoscopy in July. She confirmed that the Mohs surgery did not require a COVID-19 test and answered my other questions about that day. She kept reassuring me that they would take good care of him and I didn’t need to be stressed about it. I am so thankful that my prayers were answered and that we can move forward with what we need to do next week!!! God is good and He cares for us with His mercy and abundant love!!

Testimony is not limited to speech about what God has done. Testimony is speech shaped by what God has done. Testimony is language that seeks with honesty and humility to allow another to hear, perhaps even experience what we have experienced or known in God. In the case of the psalmist, such testimony would necessarily be speech that is accompanied by a listening ear.

Tom Long asserts that the practice of telling our story is the means by which we come to understand our own faith. Testimony is not simply telling what we have already come to believe, but testimony is a means by which we come to believe. True enough, but there is more revealed in Psalm 66. Testimony is the means by which we are reminded that God’s faithfulness to us is not limited to us. God’s love is not limited to those in the sanctuary or those sitting in our homes today watching this broadcast. The object of God’s redemptive love is creation-wide.

This is why it is essential for people of faith to speak faithfully; to offer our testimony. Our testimony should express the humility witnessed in God’s gracious choice to listen to us. Therefore we should spend as much time listening as we do speaking. A practice of testimony in this way would be far more than simply showing respect for our neighbor; it would reveal our trust in God’s love for our neighbor. If our testimony does not demonstrate a holy love that is creation-wide in scope, it will not be a faithful testimony to the God who has listened. May we be blessed with a listening ear and a heart-felt story to share with our neighbors about God’s love for us and for them. In Christ’s name, Amen.