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The National Presbyterian Church

One the Road with Jesus IX: Telling Tales

Joshua 4:1-7 John 4: 7-10, 28, 29, 39-42; Micah 6:8

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Through the fall we've been thinking about the Christian life in terms of a journey. This is a profoundly biblical image:

- Starting from the journey of Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden
- And leading to the journeys of Abraham and Moses into the promised land
- As well as Jesus' journeys throughout his ministry. And then at the end
 - His Palm Sunday journey down the Mt. of Olives into Jerusalem
 - And on Good Friday – his journey on what we call the “*via dolorosa*” (the road of sorrow) up Mt. Calvary to his death on the cross.

So we've talked about *literal journeys* and the lessons they teach about the *spiritual journey* that each of us is on, in which God wants to use every twist and turn in the road of life to transform our faith and character.

So, for example, in the spiritual journey as on other journeys,

- We need a guide to go ahead of us (*and this is Jesus' function*)
- There are difficulties setting out, getting going and staying the course (*we must not be surprised*)
- We need the right travelling companions (*it's never good to travel alone*)
- We need to make time to slow down, and not keep rushing from place to place or we'll grow weary and quit too soon (*we do this in our weekly church attendance, but maybe we should copy Jesus, and do it every day in some way as well?*)
- And then there's the excitement of “looking round the corner,” seeing what's next (whether it's *God's overwhelming vision of heaven or his purposes on earth*)
- And then, last Sunday, we talked about the need to “travel lightly”: not only to pack what we need for the journey, but to be able to leave possessions behind or give them away, so that we're not encumbered by too much stuff. The material world is not bad (it's God's creation) but it can so easily become an unintended burden, and throw us off our mission and our course.

Or, let me put it like this: What do you want to be remembered for? *Being A Getter? Or a Giver?*

And who do you want to be? *Effective in your mission for Christ? Or side-tracked by stuff?*

So this is how we've thought about the idea of the journey so far, and its spiritual parallels. **And today**, as we come to the end of the series, I want us to think about the end of the journey too: the impact of the journey once we return home, when we remember and tell tales about all that happened . . . something people have been doing for generations.

So over 3000 years ago when Joshua and the people of Israel crossed the River Jordan (just as they had crossed the Red Sea 40 years before), and entered the promised land, God told them

to take some stones from the riverbed and place them in a huge pile on dry land to create a memorial that would *evoked the story of their journey* and of God's faithfulness in future generations to come.

When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." (Josh 4:6-7)

So the stones were to be reminders, like photos, or monuments, or national holidays that stir up or sharpen the memory so that we can tell the tale.

And I suspect that every one of us *has a tale or two* to tell, a memory about some place, somewhere, where something wonderful or awful happened, and that has somehow worked its way into our memories and souls . . . a story that we want to share

Sometimes the stories are just good stories to tell:

So I've told some of you about flying across the Atlantic on 9/11/2001 and landing in Newfoundland with 15,000 other transatlantic fliers.

- sitting on the plane for 12 hours before Canadian immigration could process us
- watching endless reruns of the movie Shrek (the only movie that all the children could watch!)
- then disembarking from the plane with no bags or luggage at all, except for passports and a toothbrush
- and the overwhelming love and kindness meeting us with food and shelter, soap, water, underwear, socks, and free phone calls anywhere around the world to loved ones.

And maybe I've shared about being stuck in the Separation Wall between Bethlehem and Jerusalem because the Israeli authorities forgot to take our group to a special door for tourists where we wouldn't have to mix with the locals.

- So there we were for more than an hour, with hundreds of Palestinians crammed in a tiny security space inside the wall (think of the thickness of the walls of a European Castle!) all trying to get to work or see friends in Jerusalem.
- And we become part of conversations that money cannot buy!
- Yes, there are some who might be terrorists, but the people crushed up against us included a doctor, and contract laborers, like us: just trying to make a life for themselves and their families.

Some stories, are just good stories to tell, and **then there are others that change us in some way**, giving to us, for example, a powerful sense of gratitude and thanksgiving that we are the recipients of beauty and sacrifice and privilege that most of the world never sees

Last fall I was fortunate enough to be able to go to a family wedding in Spain, and saw the *Sagrada Familia Cathedral* in Barcelona – the masterpiece of the architect Antoni Gaudi. I'd seen photos before, and had found nothing impressive about the building. And so I was completely taken by surprise when I actually stood there, and felt a sense of awe and wonder that all the photos in the world could not convey. In fact I was left with a profound sense of thanksgiving

- For being able to travel and be there

- For the beauty of the place – *outside and inside*
- For the skill of the architect and builders
- and for my family with whom I was able to share the moment

And memories of Journeys can do that: even when the events and stories and memories themselves are mixed.

After Hurricane Mitch in 1998 the youth group of my congregation in Kentucky traveled to Honduras to help rebuild a village that had been decimated by the hurricane. The villagers were living in makeshift buildings while their community was being rebuilt. And at least two things happened to the group.

The first was that they witnessed true humility and Christian love in action. The houses for the village leaders were completed first. But they chose not to move-in until the whole village had been rebuilt; they chose not to claim rank or privilege. And they were happy! And so too was the whole village. It was a clear demonstration of a small “Christian Commonwealth.”

The second was that our youth made friends with the village children. But two weeks after our group returned they received news that one of the girls – Carmen – had died. Carmen wasn’t just sick! But she died from appendicitis, a ruptured appendix. There was no medical care for something we deem to be basic.

Such experiences as these clearly lead to thanksgiving and gratitude for all the things we take for granted: houses and homes and medical care whenever we need it.

But thanksgiving by itself somehow doesn’t seem to be quite enough, does it? Unless it’s accompanied by something else: transformation – the need to be changed by the stories we experience.

- If poor people don’t grab and are happy – what am I going to do with that? Why am I so consumed by the need to get this, that or the next thing? Maybe I’d actually find more joy for myself and for others if I acted like them, and let go of some claim or another which is my right?
- OR If people all over the world die of things I would never die of, what am I going to do about that? Maybe God use my life or my church to make a difference?

And this is what God wants: to weave together all the journeys and experiences and stories of our lives, the beautiful ones as well as the painful ones, together with the stories of God’s Word in the Bible and to build up within us a memory bank of tales that we find ourselves telling and re-telling, and that transform both our sense of thankfulness and our behavior.

Which is what happened to a woman Jesus met at a well in a region called Samaria in Israel (now the West Bank).

Jesus is on a journey and so is she (though hers is much shorter) and they both come to a well, known as Jacob’s well.

- Jesus is stopping there for a rest and a drink of water
- And she’s come there – left her own town – to come to get water at this well by herself (something women never did alone *unless of course their relationships were tense or broken*).

And they get into a discussion about spiritual things in which Jesus makes her uncomfortable by probing into her secret past but in such a way that *she knows*

that he knows her and still loves her. And this is amazing to her: no doubt because she's always felt condemned before – but **not** this time; **not** by Jesus. And this changes her life. Not a command to be good. Not a feeling of guilt at being bad! But *being known, fully and absolutely, and yet still loved.*

And because of this she cannot stop herself from telling others about this man, Jesus *and in the telling*, she's filled with thanksgiving and wonder and is herself transformed. And, when other people see this thanksgiving and transformation – which they do – she becomes “an agent of God's transformation” in the lives of others!

²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city.

She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

³⁹**Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony**, “He told me everything I have ever done.” John 4

This is how it's supposed to be. This is why God leads us on meandering paths: to give us the very memories we need; the very stories we need, all the coincidences, the tragedies, and the moments of awe and wonder, that we can be woven together with our experience of Jesus and the Bible and that will lead to thankfulness and transformation

Sadly, though, this doesn't always happen. Sometimes there's no thankfulness. And sometimes there's no transformation – or neither!

In fact, it's quite possible to say we've had an experience of God's hand at work in our lives and to know all about the life and teaching of Jesus, to know all about the Ten Commandments, and yet remain unchanged by them all.

Indeed we are at a particular moment in history when the disconnect, the “cognitive dissonance” between the claims of personal Christian experience and the Biblical stories we claim as central to our lives, on the one hand, and the transformative power of those stories on the other hand, is at an all-time high in our churches and our nation.

Instead of being viewed as grateful – *Christians are commonly viewed as arrogant or angry.* And Instead of being transformed -- *all too often we are seen as complicit* in supporting racial supremacy, indecency, incivility and misogyny! Jesus would be horrified!

This week, columnist, Michael Gerson asked:

What institution, of all institutions, should be providing the leaven of principle to political life? What institution is specifically called on
-- to oppose the oppression of children, women and minorities, to engage the world with civility and kindness,
-- to prepare its members for honorable service to the common good?
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-russia-investigations-spectacular-accumulation-of-lies/2017/11/16/741024bc-cb0e-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html?utm_term=.ed7cd6eb30f8

That institution, of course, *is us*, the church: the institution that is supposed to be formed **and transformed and shaped** by the stories of the Bible

- like the story of God’s faithfulness to his ancient people,
*leading them out of slavery and across the Red Sea
and then across the Jordan River into the promised land*
- and in particular: the story of the grace of God shown to us
in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

and transformed and shaped not only by the stories in the Bible, BUT transformed and shaped, too, by our own stories: the stories of our own daily experiences with God, our Good Shepherd on the journey of life. Stories, which when we tell them are intended by God not just to make us feel good, but to make us feel **so thankful that we are transformed.**

Eighty years ago this year, German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words in his book, The Cost of Discipleship:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church.
Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury,
from which she showers blessings with generous hands,
without asking questions or fixing limits.

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is the preaching of
forgiveness without requiring repentance,
baptism without church discipline,
communion without confession . . .

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship,
grace without the cross,
grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace (*on the other hand*) is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow,
and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.
It is costly because it calls us to give up our lives to God,
and it is grace because it gives us the only true life.
Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son:
“*You were bought at a price,*”
and ***what has cost God much -- cannot be cheap for us.***

The Cost of Discipleship , Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), pp 45-49

Look back, my friends, on the paths on which God has led you and so many others through the ages, and tell the tales! Tell the stories about the journey that God has used and will use to help you grown in grace your whole life long until you meet him face-to-face, stories blending together the Biblical witness and our own experiences, that God longs to use to change you, and create within you ***a deeply thankful spirit . . . and a powerfully transformed life.***

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