

Last week in the reflection and prayer section, of the bulletin, I wrote: A gift from our Jewish, spiritual, heritage is its rich, oral, tradition. Grandparents tell their grandchildren the stories of creation, of the exodus, of God's provision in the desert and of God's continuing faithfulness.

However, too often, we neglect to tell the Bible stories - neither those in the first testament, nor the second. Nor do we tell the stories of our own personal spiritual journeys, or those of our ancestors? What stories of God's grace do you need to tell to someone in your family? What moments of awe at God's majesty and love in the past week do you need to share? How do you talk about your faith with loved ones, with friends? Meeting God in Everyday Life; The Spiritual Formation Bible, NRSV, 1999.

In the sight of Israel's ancestors, God worked marvels for them in the land of Egypt, and in their desert journey. God divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters part. He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused the waters to flow like rivers." So none should forget what God had done for them, the stories of the Exodus were told and passed down through the generations.

Psalm 78 praises God for liberating Israel from Egyptian bondage. Compared to Egypt, Israel was small and weak. But, God's power was greater than the abusive power of Pharaoh, and so the people were able to leave Pharaoh's ruling, and his land. And, while the Israelites new lives saw times of freedoms and possibilities, it wasn't easy. There were times of trials and frustrations, anger, and doubts. But always God's mercy and support was with them.

This psalm is often classified as a historical writing because it tells the rich history of Israel beginning with the story of the Exodus to the reign of King David. Its focus is on God's faithfulness to the people, and the people's hope and trust in God, despite their grumblings, doubts, fears, and uncertainties. It was the psalmist belief that each generation had a responsibility to teach the next one, and the one after that, about the works and words of God, to protect them from sin and rebellion, and to teach them hope and trust.

The psalm was taught to children with the hope that in telling the stories, some of which contained miracles, they would learn to manage their despair; to be open to the healing and transformational ways of God; to see a world of possibilities, as their ancestors had come to know. We are included in this charge, to tell this story, for it is our faith history also. But who tells the stories anymore?

People are so busy even now, during the pandemic. We are in such a rush to get back to normal, and we try so hard to normalize the lives we now lives. The internet with Zoom meetings was a way to connect with work, a way to get children some sort of education, and a way to have a virtual doctor's appointment. But it has also served as a way to create busyness. We are on Zoom for all kinds of reasons now. That and TV, Netflix, Hulu, Disney, and a few programs have become the focus of many people; it's multigenerational. Others have found a way to spend time by playing card games over the phone. Now, I am not saying there is anything wrong with any of these, except when they interfere with other aspects of life, or they become a primary way of coping.

And, that's not to say some haven't found the time at home more peaceful. I remember having a phone conversation with someone who said she was enjoying her time at home. It reminded her of when she was younger and she had time to read, sew, cook, and relax. Yes, she missed family and friends, but the hassles and hustles of everyday life for her had calmed down. I had to agree with her. It was nice.

But who now has time to read, or sit and tell stories, any kind of story, that they knew from childhood? Who has the time to talk about their ancestors, or family heritage, never mind stories about their faith. It almost sounds odd to even think anyone would do so - and that is sad.

I grew up loving stories. I still remember my kindergarten teacher, Mrs Tucker taking us to the playground, one day toward the end of the school year. That portion of the playground was flush with trees. We brought our lunch because we were having a picnic. During our picnic Mrs Tucker sang the Teddy Bears Picnic song, and then told us a story. Interesting what children deem significant, to the point that it is remembered so many years later.

I also remember the times when my dad would sit in our living room with my sister, brother, and me, and either read Bible stories to us, or tell them to us. I can't remember which ones, but I remember the warmth of the moment.

It was also either my father, or my Aunt Janet, maybe both, who told me how our family came to worship in the North Dutch Reformed Church. It began when my Italian, Catholic, grandmother married my Scot, Presbyterian, grandfather. Her father was not happy with this marriage

and as a result chose to not have any contact with her, or her family. Partially for that reason, my grandparents elected not to attend church any more, nor raise their 7 children, in the church.

Now, one Saturday, my grandmother was painting her living room walls. She sent those 7 children out to play and warned them not to come in until she was done. They hadn't been out long when there was a knock on the door. My angry grandmother went to the door, opened it, all prepared to let which ever child, it was, have a piece of her mind, when there stood a young Dutch Reformed Pastor, recently graduated from Seminary, just called to his first church. He was out greeting people in the neighborhood and inviting them to church.

As it turned out, the young Rev Hagemen spent some of that Saturday morning helping my grandmother paint her living room. I don't know what he said to her, but whatever their conversations consisted of, the next day, the Macfie's found themselves in church. Rev. Hageman and my grandparents remained life long friends. Most of their children were married by him, and their grandchildren baptized by him. Years later, when I had a sense of being called to ministry, I went and visited The Rev. Dr. Hagemen who was then President of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in NJ.

Stories are important they can tell us about our heritage, and who and what influenced our spiritual journeys. While stories about family, friends, personal incidents, and events, can reveal things about our faith, stories from the Bible tell us about our faith roots all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul continually encouraged this Christian community to seek unity. It was important to him that they understood and remember what they had been taught about faith and unity; what they were taught about sharing with one another the love, compassion, and encouragement they had received. Throughout the letter one gets the sense of the love and compassion Paul had for this group of believers. Paul hoped that they would follow the ways of Jesus Christ. In this letter, he included a hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) one that was possibly familiar to this congregation in Philippi, that beautifully described Jesus. - Paul said, Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ;

who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.

Both of the passages we read today are stories about our faith. They are stories of hope and inspiration; hope in the faithfulness and mercy of God, and in the inspiration of, and the will to follow Jesus Christ. We must continue to be committed to knowing these works and words of God, especially God's work of salvation in Christ. And, we must be willing to teach the next generation, no, actually more than a generation because we now have two or three generations of people who are unchurched.

We must be willing to teach them of God's mighty deeds, powers, and wonders, of God's love, forgiveness, and mercies, because people need to hear that, and to know that there is such a thing as forgiveness, mercy, and yes, love. I really believe some people don't know. And, we should teach in such a way that all who listen are awestruck at God's wonderful works; that all feel, not just hear it, but feel the mercies, and love of Jesus Christ. We should share with others, stories of the men and women of faith. Share with them personal stories of how God has answered prayers in our own lives. Or how we walk in faith with Jesus; or how the Holy Spirit guides our choices and opens to us a world of possibilities, you couldn't possibly see without the Spirit's influence.

I think about the news lately and how some European countries are already preparing for the expectation of having to quarantine again due to the Corona Virus. This is a growing expectation for us also, and it brings with it the possibility of having persons infected with the flu virus as well. We have other issues to address also. When we were first confronted with isolating ourselves, within the confines of our homes, due to Covid 19, it

was in March. Now we will be probably be facing isolation again but this time in the late fall to winter. This time period includes public holidays and significant celebrations in the history of the Church. How do we tell our stories in such a way that people hearing them can turn to them or to us for comfort and guidance?

Advent is a time of expectation and preparation for the celebration of Jesus at Christmas, and the return of Jesus at the Second Coming. We need to share others the faith, love, and encouragement we have received from these stories. They need to see , in our experiences, and those of our ancestors, how these stories have helped us cope with life's challenges. And then we need to share with one another the love, compassion, and encouragement that we received. We need to be Christ like, humble, giving, encouraging, respectful, showing interest in others, compassionate and loving.

Amen!