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I Love to Tell the Story

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Psalm 78

Whenever my brother, sister, and I get together, we invariably tell stories of our childhood. There's the story of going camping at Wallowa Lake, and tricking my sister into thinking old worn sticks were "gnu" antlers. She was young and gullible. We were older and smart. My brother relishes the tale of my senior year when I had a party during my parents' absence. I told Todd he could come if he helped clean up. He did, putting wax over a beer-laden kitchen floor. When my folks arrived, they stuck to the floor and I was in big trouble. Then too there's the story of the time my mom literally "flipped her wig" while directing the choir.

Stories are powerful. The author of Psalm 78 understands the power of story, and the absolute necessity of it. He understands that we cannot know God without stories; that we cannot know ourselves without them. The psalmist knows that we cannot be the people of God without telling the story of God, passing the story on to each generation. Things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us, the psalmist writes.

What draws us to a story is the promise of finding: finding a different world, finding another time, finding ourselves. There is something in us that hungers for a story. We inhabit the skin of another and somehow, in the hands of a good story, we are returned to ourselves.

Elie Wiesel says that God created us because God loves stories.

Psalm 78 is a storytelling psalm that the people of Israel used in community worship, as part of their celebrations of God's goodness to Israel. In its entire and long version, it tells of Israel's past failures to be faithful to God. Psalm 78 cautions the people of God to tell the stories not simply of their successes but also of their failures. The teacher in Psalm 78 summons Israel to listen and be ready to be instructed by the stories of the past, to learn from those who have gone before.

These teachers were not naive or gullible. They understood that God does not guarantee physical protection and safety. As they looked back on it from the perspective of history, their survival in the wilderness—the fact that they did not die of hunger and thirst—was nothing short of miraculous. But they were realists. People did get hungry and sick. People did die on the way.

In America today, there's a story being told that comes from the "prosperity Gospel". It tells about a God who promises to make you wealthy, healthy, and happy if you simply think positively, pray hard, "name it and claim it". But the God that the Israelites were learning to trust did not guarantee their health and safety and welfare. The story they told their children offered something deeper and more important: a God who was with them on bad days as well as good days, a God whose loving presence in the very midst of darkness and suffering and death gave them power and stamina and courage.

The author of Psalm 78 is issuing a call, a call to listen and remember, but also a call to pass on the stories of our faith and the faithful. The psalmist understands the power of the story, a power that not only creates memories and teaches but also provides hope.

On this Sunday after the election when our country remains divided and bitter partisanship threatens our union, in a year when our health and economic well-being continues to be tenuous for many and upended for countless others, we must follow our ancestors, look to the past, and once again trust in a God who promises to be with us, in good times and bad

What are the stories we tell each other in this moment? What are the stories that shape us in this perilous time and give us life? I think of the ways the deep and rich stories of the cloud of witnesses shape us, giving us life and gathering us in. Stories of the saints who have gone before, paving a path for the rest of us. Stories of congregations, doing the hard work and tackling the hard subjects. Stories of people struggling together, with the support of a great cloud of witnesses. These stories, our stories have power to connect us and give us hope.

As we repeat these stories over and over, they shape our memory and our experiences, and it is through these memories and experiences that we grow and learn. In the repetition of stories, we don't simply remember the stories, they become a part of our lives, ingrained in our thoughts and actions, and we are able to give the story life. The stories of the faith bring great wonder to all the generations — when we share them.

And so the challenge before us, in these uncertain and perilous days, is to take stock, to be storytellers for our children and grandchildren, telling them how to trust the goodness and faithfulness of God, in the good times and not so good.

We lift our voices and share another story, stories of faith and faithfulness, stories we pass on from generation to generation, stories we have heard and known from our great cloud of witnesses. We share our stories so that we may not grow weary or lose heart

amid a divided nation, a global pandemic, growing poverty and economic insecurity . We share our stories so that we remember to set our hope in God, and give life to God's commandments — after all, what is the good in a story if you don't tell it.

In 1976, my parents bought a hardware store in Twin Falls, Idaho. It was a franchise that gave my mom and dad market research assuring it would have a promising future. But the data was wrong. And over the course of my college years, my parents lost most of their life savings. And yet, here's the story I most remember. My dad was driving along highway 80, holding all the worries of this time. And then, he said, "Suddenly, I felt God's presence all around me, and I knew that no matter what happened, God would see me through."

And when I've gone through hard times, unemployment, the death of people I loved and the dark despair of depression, this story helps me.

As the song says:

I love to tell the story
Of unseen things above
Of Jesus and his glory
Of Jesus and his love

I love to tell the story
Because I know 'tis true
It satisfies my longings
As nothing else can do

I love to tell the story
'Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and his love.