

***“Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One...”***

**Reverend Bill Gause**

**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**

**29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**October 22, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: Psalm 116:12-18 (The Message)**

What can I give back to God for the blessings he’s poured out on me? I’ll lift high the cup of salvation—a toast to God! I’ll pray in the name of God; I’ll complete what I promised God I’d do, and I’ll do it together with his people. When they arrive at the gates of death, God welcomes those who love him. Oh, God, here I am, your servant, your faithful servant: set me free for your service! I’m ready to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice and pray in the name of God. I’ll complete what I promised God I’d do, and I’ll do it in company with his people, In the place of worship, in God’s house, in Jerusalem, God’s city. Hallelujah!

**Second Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:1-15 (NRSV)**

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup>And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. <sup>3</sup>Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; <sup>4</sup>and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. <sup>5</sup>Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. <sup>6</sup>When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. <sup>7</sup>When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. <sup>8</sup>Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. <sup>9</sup>Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, <sup>10</sup>but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. <sup>11</sup>When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. <sup>12</sup>I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. <sup>13</sup>I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. <sup>14</sup>“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup>Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”



**Sermon: “Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One...”**

I grew up in a little three-bedroom house at 1128 Highmarket Street in Georgetown, SC. It wasn’t a terribly big or fancy house, but it did have a little brass plaque beside the front door that read: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Now since we just read that, you should recognize it as a line from Joshua's speech at the end of the book of Joshua. Joshua was the successor to Moses. When Moses died after leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, it was Joshua who took over and actually led them across the Jordan River into the land that God had promised them. The speech Joshua gives is after the people have taken the land; after they've struggled through the wilderness, after they've crossed the Jordan, and after they've conquered Jericho and Ai and a whole bunch of city states that were already in the Promised Land before they arrived.

I have seen that line on bumper stickers, and needle-point samplers and all kinds of things. And what it amounts to is a statement of loyalty to God. And it's interesting in the way Joshua presents it. He says to the people "Decide this day whom you will serve." And he actually leaves it up to them to choose. But then he tries to influence that choice by telling them an epic story of how God has been good and faithful to the people for generations.

And it's kind of like when you ask your friend to help you decide between having ice cream or pie for dessert and he says "Look, I'm not gonna' choose for you, but let's just say that ice cream is the single greatest accomplishment of the human race, and *plus* it will improve your life and make you more attractive." The story really leads the listener to the decision Joshua wants them to make. Joshua is asking the people to declare their loyalty, but that loyalty should grow out of their collective story. And their collective story is filled with examples of God's goodness. He leaves the choice up to them, but he knows that there really is no choice. Our story drives our loyalty.

Now we declare our loyalties all over the place to all sorts of things: we are loyal to football teams, and universities; to political parties and political ideals; to family members and hometowns and even brands of fabric softener. But those loyalties grow out of our stories. Know the story, and you understand the loyalty.

When I was a campus minister at Clemson University, people were appalled to see that I had a University of South Carolina sticker on my truck. (For the uninitiated, that would be like sporting Michigan gear here in Columbus.) How could such an abomination be possible?!? But for anyone who took the time to learn my story, they discovered that I had gone to school and earned two degrees at USC, and spent a significant part of my life there. If you knew my story, my loyalty made sense.

I remember a member of the church who was a die-hard Clemson fan asking Mary once, near the end of our time in Clemson, if she was ready to change from being a USC fan to a Clemson fan. We had, as he pointed out, been living in Clemson for ten years. Her reply was priceless and completely accurate. "Hack," she said (because his name was Hack) "if your job relocated you to Columbia, SC, how long would it take you to give up your Clemson roots and start being a Carolina fan?". "Fair enough, Mary," he said. "Fair enough."

You see our loyalties don't exist in a vacuum. We dedicate ourselves to people and institutions because of what has gone on before. We pledge ourselves to something or someone because of our story. The little plaque on our front door at 1128 Highmarket Street stood as a silent witness to our family's pledge of allegiance to God. But it was also a way for our family to show that our story, was a part of Joshua's story.

Now, Joshua retells the long history of Israel starting with Abraham, tracing the narrative through Isaac and Jacob, through the story of Joseph and how he and his brothers wound up in Egypt, all the way

down to slavery and the exodus and the delivery of the people into the homeland that God had first promised many generations before. Joshua's story recounts the promises God has made to Israel and the ways in which God has kept those promises. All that they have is because of God's goodness to them. That's why the Israelites dedicated themselves to God. And the people of God have been adding to that story for generations. My family included.

In this stewardship season, we are all being asked to dedicate ourselves, our time, and our treasure to God and to God's church. But such dedication is an act of loyalty, and as it did with Joshua and the Israelites so long ago, loyalty must grow out of your experience with God; it must emerge as a part of your story. Today, I want us to think about our stories and how our individual stories are a continuation of the larger story of the church. And so, as you consider your own story, I want to tell you part of mine.

### **Chapter 1: Belonging**

My story begins long before I was able to even understand things like God and church and communion. Church has always stood as a representation of God and I've been in church ever since I can remember; longer, actually.

I remember listening to the piano and the choir and my parents singing in church and wondering why they were singing about "bringing in the sheep." I remember my mother breaking her communion bread and sharing it with me and saving a little bit of the grape juice in her cup and giving that to me too, because I was too young to take communion for myself, but I was still a part of God's family.

As a small child, I learned that when you're visiting someone's house around Christmastime, the presents under their tree are not for you. When we would visit relatives and neighbors during the holidays, I would always scan the packages under their tree looking for one for me. Of course, I found none. I was disappointed to learn that I shouldn't expect there to be a gift for me under another family's tree.

In the middle of my third-grade year my father got a new job in Alexandria, LA so we moved. We started attending the Presbyterian Church there and as Christmas approached, the Sunday school teacher put wrapped presents under the tree in our classroom. I was new, there. No one knew me. I was an outsider, so I understood that those presents were not for me. So - imagine how surprised I was when, on the day of the Sunday School Christmas party, the teacher, after handing out gifts to all the other children in the class, reached down under the tree and pulled out a gift for me, too.

I learned that day that in the church, there are no outsiders. Everyone has a place.

### **Chapter 2: Family**

I spent most of my growing up years in Georgetown, SC where we were, and my parents still are, members of Georgetown Presbyterian Church. I sang in Miss Ramona's children's choir, and always had a part in the annual youth group play. I remember my first Sunday school teachers, Lisa Young and Emory Gillespie. They were just high school students when I first walked into their fourth grade class, but they seemed like seasoned adults to nine-year-old me.

I can still take you to our family's pew. Oh, there was no official arrangement; we didn't pay rent or anything like that. But we always sat in front of the Youngs and behind the Shepherds. If for some reason one of those families sat a pew or two off from their normal spot, the other families would adjust

accordingly. But that rarely happened. And still, lo these 30-something years later, I can find my pew because it's the one with black shoe polish scuff marks from where I would kick the pew in front of me.

I grew up in that church. Any time the doors were open, I was there; worship on Sunday mornings, youth group on Sunday nights, Wednesday family night suppers, vacation Bible school and church camp every summer, Christmas caroling and hayrides every winter. Many of my school teachers and coaches were also my Sunday school teachers, and youth group advisors, and they were the members I worshiped with every week.

It was in the church that I learned that family isn't always the people who live in your house and they don't always have the same last name as you. But it was not until I became an adult that I truly understood the significance of that fact.

### **Chapter 3: Sharing the Load**

About seven years ago, our younger son Harry was diagnosed with autism. That was an extremely difficult time for Mary and me. We weren't sure what it meant. All of a sudden, our dreams for his future were thrown into doubt. We were grieving, but it wasn't the kind of loss other people around us seemed to understand. We felt lost and alone.

But my students rallied around us and loved us. As a campus minister, my students were my congregation, and that congregation embraced us, and they became more like a family. I believe that God sent them to us when we needed them most. They stood by us and helped me be angry when I needed to be, and they helped me to laugh when I needed that, too. But most importantly, they were a presence with Mary and me. And through them we felt God's love and reassurance that though we were walking a difficult journey, we were not walking it alone.

There's a great line in Pat Conroy's novel "The Prince of Tides" where the narrator says "There are families that live out their entire lives without a single thing of interest happening to them. I envy those families." I used to believe the same thing. I thought that most people actually live pretty uneventful lives. But one of the things I've learned as a pastor is that everybody has something. As the poet Longfellow wrote "into each life some rain must fall."<sup>1</sup> Each of us has hardships. Each of us experiences loss. Each of us struggles with challenges, either physical or emotional, that can leave us wounded, exhausted, scared, frustrated.

But what I have also found is that the church is a place where we bear one another's burdens, share one another's difficulties, and offer a comforting shoulder on which to lean when the journey gets hard. The church is not filled with strong people to be envied. It is filled with broken people who embody God to one another.

### **Chapter 4: Cobwebs in the Corners**

As a child I was always taught that the church is God's house. And I thought of it that way: as an immaculate cathedral to be kept majestic and holy as would befit the home of a divine and eternal God. We're quiet in church. We don't run in church. If you open a peppermint you'd better not make too much noise crinkling the wrapper in church.

---

<sup>1</sup> Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, *The Rainy Day*, 1842, Stanza 3

But what I've since discovered is that "yes," this is God's house, but that doesn't mean it's supposed to be pristine. This is God's house because it bears the fingerprints and smudges of God's less than perfect people. It holds the dust that falls from our shoes and our clothes as we come to rest in this sanctuary for dirty, tired travelers. It is filled not just with praise to God, but also with questions and complaints and crying babies and pleas for mercy. It welcomes the sinners and the saints, and generally more of the former than the latter. And those aren't the things that sully God's house; they are the things that make it holy.

It is in the church that I learned that God's house is not a retreat for the perfect, but a refuge for the wounded and the weary.

### **Chapter 5: Finding and Being Found**

Many of my church memories revolve around Christmas. When my sister and I were teenagers, she bought me a Christmas tie that had a little chip down in the tip so when you pinched the end of the tie, it would play, and loudly so, Jingle Bells. She gave it to me before Christmas and told me it would mean a lot to her if I would wear it to the Christmas Eve service at our church, and so I did.

During the service, as things got quiet; as the preacher read about angels and shepherds and the mystery of the divine birth, during the most dramatic point in the story, as the congregation sat in silence awaiting the culmination of the most hallowed of dramas, my sister stealthily reached over, and squeezed the end of my tie.

Every Christmas Eve at Georgetown Presbyterian Church, we would have worship at about 7:00. It would be dark out at that time, and we would sit in the sanctuary listening to the age old story of Jesus' birth. It was a "lessons and carols" service, though I didn't know to call it that back then. We would read a part of the story and then sing a carol. It was a candlelight service and so, as we entered the church, we would be given a small candle. I would hold onto mine tightly for the whole service allowing the warmth of my hand to make the wax soft enough to bend. My father had shown me how to do this once, probably to the chagrin of my mother, and I made a practice of it every year after.

At the end of the service, as the story built to its conclusion, as we read about the birth and about the angels and the shepherds visiting the manger in Bethlehem, the lights would go out. And the organist would begin to softly play "Silent Night". As the congregation sang in the dark, the ushers would begin to light the candles of worshippers who would pass the light to their neighbors until the entire sanctuary was filled with holy light. It is in the beauty of moments like those that I have felt closest to God. It is in the peace of candlelight and the power of song and the community of kindred souls that I have felt God so very near.

You see, the church defines me. Its story is my story. I know you all have stories, too. I'm sure that some of them are similar to mine and some are very different. I have given the better part of my life to service in the church but that's just the direction my story has taken. It is just one alongside millions of stories that stand as a continuation of the Bible story. My life is a product of that story and that story drives my dedication to God.

So why are you here? What is your story? When future generations recount the goodness of God and the way God as worked in the lives of God's people, what will they say about you? What will be your chapter in that long, epic tale?

❖ 6 ❖

In this stewardship season, we are being called upon to consider the long history of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love, how we have benefited from it, and how we might respond to it. We are being asked to consider the long history of God's people and how they dedicated themselves to God's Kingdom. We're being asked to ponder our own chapters in that long, colorful story and how we might dedicate our time, talents, and treasures in helping to write the next one.

But I can't tell you what to do... I can only tell you the story and let you make your own decision. Decide this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.