

“To Tell the Old, Old Story”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2020

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-15

¹Then 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. ²And 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. ³Then 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; ⁴and 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. ⁵Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶When 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. ⁷When 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. ⁸Then 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. ⁹Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. ¹¹When 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. ¹²I 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. ¹³I 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. ¹⁴“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. ¹⁵Now 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: “To Tell the Old, Old, Story”

Long after Joshua has led the Israelites into the promised land and they have settled there, he gathers the people together and calls for them to dedicate themselves fully to God. We remember the line “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” There’s a reasonable chance you have this cross-stitched somewhere in your house right now. But it’s important to see that before Joshua declares his allegiance to God, and calls for the people to do likewise, he first recounts the story of what God has done for them.

The Bible is a lot of things: a guide to moral/ethical living, a source of church doctrine and theology, a record of history and faith development, but it is also a story, or rather a collection of stories that tell of the wondrous acts of God; stories that tell of God’s might and of God’s compassion and of the people’s experiences of them.

They are the stories of God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, and David killing Goliath with a sling and a few smooth stones, of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, and Daniel spending a restless night in a lion’s den. They are stories of Esther saving her people, of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being saved from the fiery furnace, of Rahab protecting the spies of Joshua, and of Gideon putting his fleece out to discern God’s will.

But they are not just epic stories of heroes and villains, they are stories of grace and mercy and steadfast love. They are stories of the Prodigal Son and his father who welcomed him home, the Good Samaritan who risked his own well-being for the sake of a stranger and the hemorrhaging woman who risked everything to be healed.

They are many stories that together make up one long story. It begins with the spirit of God moving over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation and winds all the way to John’s vision of the Kingdom of God where the tree of life bears it’s fruit beside the river of life that flows by the throne of God. And while that is the last of the stories you will find in your Bible, the story doesn’t end there. It keeps on going.

Oh, I don’t think you will see any new additions to the Bibles you have come to know and love. There will likely be no pages added, no new letters declared canonical. While Marvel and DC will likely spin out new stories of our favorite super

heroes for decades to come and while Lucasfilm will continue to add to the story of Star Wars, I feel pretty certain that the Biblical canon will not expand. There will be no sequels. There will be no reboots. But that doesn't mean the story ends. No, the story of God's relationship with God's people has never stopped. It has always continued on beyond the pages of what we call scripture.

The story of God's grace, mercy and steadfast love does not end because God's grace, mercy and steadfast love has not ended. Throughout history, as people have experienced God's power and presence in their lives, they have said so; they have shared that experience; they have told their stories, and they have added to the long, rich account of our journey toward God's Kingdom.

It was a story my father told. He grew up in the local Baptist church back in Homewood, South Carolina, and his mother made him attend every Sunday. Once, when they got to the end of the service, the pastor made an altar call and the organist began to play *Just as I Am*. For several verses she played, and yet no one came forward. And so, my father and his older brother, began to elbow one another, encouraging one another to take one for the team so they could just go home. Until finally someone else came forward and the song ended, and they *all* got to go home. But dad told me once that he regretted not coming forward that day, to make that profession of faith while his mother was there to hear him. She died a few years after that, but he never forgot that missed opportunity to show his faith in a way she could see. So, instead, he chose to live the rest of his life as a profession of the faith that she taught him. Just a few weeks before he died in 2018, he told me that he was not afraid, because he knew where he was going and he was ready to be with Jesus.

It was a story my mother told. Growing up as the youngest daughter of a poor family, she wore hand-me down clothes and played with paper dolls because her parents couldn't afford the real thing. But one of the most important people in her life was the Pastor of her Presbyterian church who took her to church camp in the summer where she learned and experienced the truth that God loves her and is watching over her. To this day she wears a small locket on a chain around her neck with the words to the old song "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so..."

And it's my story, too. Like my parents before me, mine is a story interwoven with patterns and threads of life in the church. It's the story of a southern boy, raised on Sunday school and church camp, led to ministry as a vocation, who in 2012 heard a call to leave everything and start over; to leave support systems of friends and family; to leave the only home my children had ever known; a job working with people I loved dearly; the familiarity of places and things; the comfort of knowing your way around in the dark.

It is a story that echoes for me the stories of Abraham, who God told to leave the land of his ancestors and go "to a place that I will show you" and Moses, sent by God on a mission for which he did not feel adequate, and Jonah, sent by God to a place he was reluctant to go and Ruth, led by God to a place of welcome and nurture for her and her family.

It is a story of God's providence and of God's care. Here in this place, Mary and I have found a magnificent school with teachers and therapists for Harry, and amazing talented doctors and surgeons for Will Grey. We have found new friends and new adventures. Here we have found a church to call home, in which we experience the fellowship of believers, the care of compassionate people, and the nurture God's children.

It is a story of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love and the ways that we have experienced it. And it is a story made possible by the Church. It is a story that has been handed down to us by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before, and that finds expression in the rhythms of worship, the challenges of learning, the rewards of service, and the comfort of fellowship in a community of fellow travelers, seekers, believers, sinners, all.

It is an epic narrative that spans generations, finding new voice in every time and place, and we each add our own stories to it...

Emily Webb's Story

What has Overbrook meant to me and my family? A 1989 TV series uses these lines in their theme song.... "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and they are always glad you came... And they are always glad you came..." Overbrook means home, family, love, community.

A sea of friendly faces has welcomed my family and me ushering us into the community of Overbrook fellowship each Sunday morning since I was 5 years old. As I grew up in Overbrook, I participated in Sunday school, vacation bible school, youth group, mission trips and confirmation class. I had many mentors in my journey: my parents, their friends, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, pastoral staff and many other members of the Overbrook family. These mentors led by

example giving of their time and talents to help build and nurture our community of Overbrook. I refer to them as my "Pillars of Overbrook." I have many stories and fond memories of growing up in Overbrook: great Sunday school teachers, youth activities, mission trips, church dinners and fellowship, family camping, even planting trees at the church farm with my parents' Add-A-Couple group. I also had many "church friends" as I called them. We saw each other on Sundays as we all went to different schools, similar to the youth of today. All of this creating a community of love, caring and great sense of belonging.

I got married at Overbrook, walking down the red carpet aisle just as I imagined when I was little; I'm not sure who was happier that day, my father or me. I brought my new family into the Overbrook community. They were welcomed and nurtured by all. I believe Jessica and Olivia had many similar experiences as I did growing up in Overbrook. Although the congregation was smaller the sense of community and belonging did not change. They also have fond memories and many great church friendships. They still are amazed when I tell them someone from Overbrook asked about them, I assure them Overbrook is their home and they are loved. Again, a place "where everyone knows your name and they are always glad you came!"

As I look at Overbrook today, I realize that I may be becoming one of those pillars I referred to earlier. My hope is that I am able to lead by example, giving of my time and talents with teaching Sunday school, serving on committees and commissions, Bible study, quilting group, social activities; being a welcoming, caring, friendly and loving Overbrook member; nurturing our Overbrook community and incorporating the youth of our church so they feel this is home. A place you want to go, "where everyone knows your name and they are always glad you came." Home.

John Sibley's Story

My name is John Sibley and I've had the great fortune of being a member of this church since my family moved to Clintonville in 2005. Overbrook has given my family and me the opportunity to serve God within the fellowship of a community of believers and more importantly, a place to give our time in volunteering to this community and the mission of the church in the name of Jesus Christ.

So, what is the benefit of all this work? Besides just the intrinsic value of helping others in our common mission, I selfishly have had great spiritual growth along the way. For example, while working on the pastoral search committee, I read through dozens of personal information forms from the potential candidates. It was an opportunity to get different perspectives on the mission of the church, interpretations of scripture and personal insights on faith from all these individuals so highly educated in both seminary and pastoral experience. As for Pastor Gause, to quote Bill Burchfield: "You had me at Ricky Bobby." That's a nod to a sermon of Bill's we got to view during our search.

One of the most worthwhile undertakings I have been involved with is the Stephen Ministry. The training under the guidance of the Stephen Ministry leaders and subsequent caregiver/care-receiver relationship has helped me immeasurably in my personal and professional life. The emphasis on deep listening and empathy, the directive to not fix a person's situation but to be there with them so they know they're not alone. One of the virtues of this ministry is, in the words of Cheryl Hubbard, it's recognition of the brokenness of the human condition (I'm paraphrasing here. Cheryl, you'll have to forgive me).

My time on Session gave me yet another opportunity to serve this congregation, alongside many of you, I might add. During the examination of officers when new members are first presented to session, I have had the pleasure of listening to people talk about their faith experience, what this church means to them and hear their vision for its future. As I heard Matthew Vetter say, and again I'm paraphrasing, we might not know all the answers, but we'll figure it out together.

If you've been counting, I've now quoted three fellow Overbrook members during this talk. I have grown just as much spiritually and personally in my interactions with you as I have in study, training, deliberation and under the instruction of the pastoral staff at this church. I thank the Lord for these gifts, but it is to the congregation and staff here at Overbrook that I owe a great debt of gratitude for nominating, training and entrusting me to the positions I have held here. I hope I have performed to your expectations because the blessings my family and I have received through service can never be repaid.

Sherry Jones' Story

Overbrook Church – The place (my church home)

When I step inside I feel at peace; safe and secure.

Overbrook Church – The people (my faith family)

I feel loved, cared about, accepted even by those I don't know well. Our pastors love and care about every one of us, and their guidance and encouragement, their genuine interest in who we are as individuals and what we have to offer is what pulls us all together.

Overbrook Church – The church (God's church)

I feel his presence. God is watching over us. God's spirit moves among us. God speaks to us. God comforts us. God moves us.

We serve our God by serving others.

Here at Overbrook we have many opportunities to do God's work. We can be deacons, session members, Stephen ministers, Sunday school teachers, lay readers, greeters, ushers, office volunteers, and more. We reach outside our church community by service at the homeless shelter, packing lunches for the Open Shelter, Food Sunday donations. We give to disaster relief (for our country and others). We pack and send boxes of items for our military. Our youth serve others through their mission trip each summer.

I love my church for all it is and does.

But there is still so much more to do. God grant us the ability to do so.

These voices you have heard today are but a few of the stories of this congregation. These are our stories and they are colored deeply by our lives in the Church. But I know that you have stories to tell, too. I'm sure that some of them are similar to the stories you've heard today, and some are very different. But they are all important parts of the longer Biblical story that we have inherited.

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

In this stewardship season, we are being called upon to consider the expansive 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 rich 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 treasure 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.