11-5/6-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25 Stories of the Saints Season of Saints Series

*“Sing with all the saints in glory, since the resurrection song!”*

Those were the words that began our final hymn last Sunday, as all weekend we gave thanks for the saints who have gone before us. Imagine the heavenly multitude, robed in white, men and women from all nations and all generations, praising God and proclaiming “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.”

You and I are invited to sing with those saints, proclaiming the good news of God’s gift of our salvation, God’s victory over sin and death, and God’s enduring promise to always be with us.

Can you also imagine the stories of resurrection faith the saints tell?

Imagine what it would be like to hear…

Mary Magdalene’s story from Easter morning of meeting the risen Lord

The Apostle Paul’s story from Damascus as he moved from scorn to faith in Jesus

Imagine what stories of risk would be told by…

1st century Christians worshipping in catacombs

21st century Christians worshipping in homes in Vietnam and Laos

Imagine the stories of enduring faith in the midst of struggle as told by…

Pioneers who survived the Oregon Trail

Soldiers who survived foxholes and bunkers

Imagine the stories that are told of everyday faithfulness, daily trust in God’s promises and God’s presence, from classroom to boardroom to flight deck to a retiree’s back deck.

Consider the stories of faith the saints can tell, from saints familiar to long forgotten, from those immortalized in scripture to those whom we knew and loved. No one has to be a super Christian to have a faith story to tell!

I have personally heard incredible stories of resurrection faith told in living rooms and hospital rooms, in casual conversation and in preaching from the pulpit. The longer I am in ministry the more fascinated I am with listening to the various ways and diverse places the journey of faith takes ordinary men and women. I marvel not only that I have former classmates serving the Lord around the world but that I have faithful church members serving the Lord within the context of daily life.

Today our Scripture passage is a story of faith from our early faith ancestors as they began to settle down in the land of Canaan. Abraham’s descendants are now very numerous, divided into the twelve tribes of Israel, and they have survived slavery in Egypt, 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and conquering the Promised Land.

Joshua, Moses’ successor, nearing the end of his life, called an assembly of all of the people of Israel at Shechem, calling them to proclaim their stories of faith then inviting them to continue their story of salvation into future generations.

The first story Joshua proclaimed was a story of a God who calls us while we are still far away, worshipping other gods. The story of God’s people began with God Almighty calling Abraham away from his father’s house, away from his father’s country, and even away from his father’s gods. Abraham had not always known our God as his God. Yet when God called, Abraham listened. When God chose Abraham to be our faith patriarch, Abraham chose to follow where God led him and obey what God called him to do.

For those of us who grew up in a family that have been Christians for many generations, this calling may be hard to grasp. Yet among the melting pot of our society, have you ever met someone whose ancestors only 1 or 2 generations prior were Buddhist or Hindu and thus had many or other gods whom they worshipped? Have you ever met someone whose family are agnostics, who claim to believe in some higher power but not necessarily the personal God of the Bible? While they may not worship any god, they sometimes allow other things or people or even concepts become their idols to emulate.

The second story Joshua proclaimed was a story of God’s fulfillment of God’s promises. God made a covenant with Abraham, a binding bond where God claimed Abraham and all of his descendants as God’s people if the people would believe in and follow God as God. While it took generations to begin, God eventually fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham of offspring too numerous to count. God also fulfilled the promise of land in which to settle, a heady promise to a nomadic farmer such as Abraham, yet as Joshua stood before the people at Shechem that promise was also fulfilled in the land of Canaan.

The third story Joshua proclaimed can be found in the in-between verses of our lectionary passage today, the story of God’s provision—how God heard the cries of God’s people and brought them out of slavery in Egypt, provided for them for 40 years while they wandered in the wilderness, then allowed them to conquer and settle in the land of Canaan, the long awaited Promised Land.

Joshua summarized the history of God’s love for God’s people, lived out in God’s presence with them, guiding them by pillar and cloud, guiding them through the consequences of their own actions, guiding them into the fulfillment of settlement in the Promised Land.

God did not just claim the children of Abraham as God’s own. Rather God went a step further and guided them along their way, working out the consequences for their bad choices into something good. No matter what they faced, God promised to remain their God, and called them to remain God’s people.

The final story Joshua proclaimed was one not yet written, the story of a faithful response. Joshua challenged the people by declaring “choose this day whom you will serve.” Will they choose God and God alone, to worship and serve in sincerity and faithfulness, in total commitment of mind and heart and life? Will they put away the gods of their ancestors, the gods for fertility and crops and livestock and good health? These gods weren’t as likely to show up in cloud or pillar, in plague or punishment. Will they begin to write a new chapter in their faith history, a chapter of renewed covenant, of singular commitment, to the God who was and who is and who always will be?

Joshua declared that he and his household would faithfully serve the Lord. And the people responded that they, too, would serve the Lord. They remembered and gave thanks for all that God had done. Yet Joshua pressed them further, warning them that if they said yes now then later turned their backs on God, God is a holy and jealous God. Yet the people persisted that they would serve the Lord.

They became their own witnesses to their covenant renewal, and bound themselves once again to be God’s people in response to God’s claiming and calling, presence and promises.

The stories of faith proclaimed by Joshua long ago are still our stories of faith today. The people, the locations, and the circumstances have all changed, but the story of God that undergirds them all never changes.

God still calls us away from the cultural gods of our ancestors or our society. We may not even call them gods or idols, yet what are the things that pull us away from Almighty God on a regular basis? What do we value as a higher priority than our faith in Jesus and our place in the community of the church?

For some people those gods include keeping up appearances or having the right possessions or the desire to succeed at a specific level. For some people those gods include money or status, sports or leisure time, power or freedom.

Yet God continues to call us back to believe in, worship, serve and love the Lord with all our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. God continues to reach out to us with love and grace whether or not we are even aware of God’s calling or even when we are running away from God’s call. God’s continual desire is to see us grow as faithful disciples of Jesus, not just those who give lip service to his name.

John Wesley would call this part of our story prevenient grace, the grace of God that calls to us before we are ever ready to pay attention, let alone accept such grace.

And that is a good news story to tell! That God loves us so much to continually reach out to us with love and with grace.

God also continues to keep God’s promises. Joshua reminded the people of God’s promises to Abraham that generations later were finally fulfilled. Our New Testament scripture proclaims that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Promised Messiah, albeit not in the way many expected.

While God does not promise us life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, God does promise to us that through faith in Jesus our sins are forgiven, our relationship to God is restored, and we can trust in the promise of one day joining the heavenly multitude to share our stories and lift up our songs.

No matter what we face in life, God promises to be with us. The ups and downs and in-betweens. When cancer wreaks havoc or children are chaotic. When we are ready to celebrate and when we are ready to weep.

In just a few weeks we will begin our celebration of Advent, the story of Christ’s coming, the promise fulfilled that God is with us. Do we believe what we sing at Christmas? Do we truly give thanks for Immanuel, God with us? I hope so. Telling the story of Christ at Christmas is another way to share the stories of the saints, from long ago through those of us here today.

Like any really good story, we cannot tell what we do not know. We cannot proclaim good news that we don’t believe in. We cannot enthusiastically share the end of a story that we haven’t engaged in.

So Joshua invites us to ponder the stories of our faith ancestors, and the story of Christ. Are we open to their stories becoming our stories? Are we open to following Jesus as a disciple?

If we are open to the stories of faith becoming our own, are we willing to choose this day whom we will serve—not the gods of this culture, only God Almighty through faith in God’s Son Jesus.

If we made that choice to follow Jesus long ago, are we willing to pledge once again today, along with Joshua from long ago, “today I choose to follow and serve the Lord. Today I confess my belief in Jesus and seek to live as his disciple. Today I renew my desire to serve God and God alone.”

My heart yearns for each and every one of us to claim this covenant for our own today. For we never know what tomorrow may bring, as evidenced by car accidents and senseless shootings. Today we are called to live by faith, for we are not promised tomorrow.

Long ago John Wesley not only described God’s choice of us as prevenient grace, he also spoke on what he believed is implied here in serving the Lord.

Wesley said,

1.The First thing implied in this service is faith; believing in the name of the Son of God. We cannot perform an acceptable service to God, till we believe on Jesus Christ whom he hath sent. Here the spiritual worship of God begins. As soon as any one had the witness in himself; as soon as he can say, "The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me;" he is able truly to "serve the Lord."

2. As soon as he believes, he loves God, which is another thing implied in "serving the Lord." "We love him because he first loved us;" of which faith is the evidence.

3. And if any man truly love God, he cannot but love his brother also. If we love Him, we cannot but love one another, as Christ loved us.

4. One thing more is implied in "serving the Lord," namely, the obeying him; the steadily walking in all his ways, the doing his will from the heart.

--taken from John Wesley “On Family Religion” Sermon 94 gbgm-umc.org/umhistory

Today we are called to serve the Lord, no matter whether we find ourselves in worship or at work, at home or at the hardware store.

Consider the foreman of a moving crew who moved a clergy family from Pennsylvania to New York. The clergyman was impressed with the care that this man took with their things, and mentioned it to him. The man responded, “Moving is hard for most people. It’s a very vulnerable time for them. People are nervous about going to a new community, and about having strangers pack their most precious possessions. I think God wants me to treat my customers with love and make them feel that I care about their things and their life. God wants me to help make their changes go smoothly.”

-“The Joshua Principle” 11-6-05 homileticsonline.com

Cashiering in a supermarket may not seem like a very rewarding position to most. But Maxine Dennis says, “to me it is. You see, I feel that my job consists of a lot more than ringing up orders, taking people's money and bagging their groceries. The most important part of my job is not the obvious. Rather it's the manner in which I present myself to others that will determine whether my customers will leave the store feeling better or worse because of their brief encounter with me.

For by doing my job well, I know I have a chance to do God's work too. Because of this, I try to make each of my customers feel special. While I'm serving them, they become the most important people in my life.”  
 --Supermarket cashier Maxine Dennis, in Of Human Hands: A Reader in the

Spirituality of Work, ed. Gregory F. Augustine Pierce (Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 49. –in “Code-Switching” 11-12-17 homileticsonline.org

Is there one specific event or project or location this week where you can honor God through your service? Would you be open to sharing with one person, if the opportunity presents itself, a short story from your faith journey, of how prayer and faith has made a difference in your life? Billy Graham used to teach people how to share a snippet of their faith story in 2-3 minutes. Anything over that and whomever you are speaking with is likely to tune you out.

We are invited to continue to sing the songs of the saints, and we are also invited to continue to tell the stories of the saints, which include sharing our own stories of God’s call and our response, of God’s love and our service.

How have you experienced the love of Jesus? How have you encountered the grace of God? How do you seek the share the hope of Jesus in the midst of your daily life? Living saints, if you can answer any of those questions this day, you have a story of faith to tell!

Your story is your story. Not the person beside you. Not mine.

So keep telling your story. Keep telling God’s story. Tell it, sing it, then live it, the good news of salvation, for this life and for the life to come.