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Bethel September 2, 2018 COMMUNION

Psalm 66

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; ²sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. ³Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. ⁴All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.” Selah
⁵Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. ⁶He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him, ⁷who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah
⁸Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, ⁹who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. ¹⁰For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. ¹¹You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; ¹²you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Tell the Story

*At the far end of town
where the Grickle-grass grows
and the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows
and no birds ever sing excepting old crows...
is the Street of the Lifted Lorax.
And deep in the Grickle-grass, some people say,
if you look deep enough you can still see, today,
where the Lorax once stood
just as long as it could
before somebody lifted the Lorax away.*

Is there a story you love to tell?

Perhaps it was a fairytale your parents told you as a child...and before you could read yourself, you had the details memorized. You could mouth the words as your parents turned the page of a book. In our house - it is the story of The Lorax by Dr. Seuss. James could “read” this book before he turned 3. What book did you have memorized as a child? What fairytale was your favorite?

Every story I heard growing up revolved around the sibling rivalry of my parents... How my Dad and his brother used try to one-up each other with pranks. How my Mom, as the oldest of 4, would manage the shenanigans of her younger sisters. I could just spend the next 20 minutes telling you the “bedtime stories” of the Marlow and Songer families. We love to tell stories when we gather together with our families and friends.

While I was visiting one of our older adults this week, let's call her Jane, I asked what story was special to her. What did she share around the table at big family gatherings? What story had shaped her life and become one of those signature family stories?

Jane told me that when she was first engaged, her future husband brought her to dinner at his aunt and uncle's home, where he lived in high school after his parents died. They had set the table with fancy china and crystal, and she was nervous about using the right spoon and fork. But they were kind and gracious to her and she was feeling more comfortable as they sat down to eat. Then, however, Aunt Kate, a staunch Southern Baptist, looked at the table and said "now, before dinner, let's have everyone share a memorized Bible verse!"

As you can imagine, Jane was panicked. A bible verse?!?! Did she have one memorized? She was a Methodist after all... Also, she was livid -- her fiancée hadn't given her any warning that this was a nightly ritual!!!. When they came to her, she recited the only bible verse that came to mind: Jesus Wept.

Jane said this story became one of the on-going jokes in their married life together – AND a tradition they carried on at their own dinner table for the 50 years that followed. She also said, every night before going to bed, her husband would remind her: Wives obey your husbands. And every night Jane quipped back: husbands love your wives. Stories like these become embedded into our family's history and memory.

And we hear those family stories so often — we know they are not entirely factual -- especially when a crucial point in the story shifts each time it's told – because trust me, when I went to visit my Aunts growing up, the same bedtime stories were told from a VERY different perspective! But there is something about the *telling*, the familiarity, how it describes the rules in our family systems, that remains true.

Think of Jane's story.... couldn't it also be YOUR story? It could certainly be my story It is true for me that we value gathering around a meal; True that scripture has grounded our family for generations; True that we have feisty women in our history who won't let men have the last word. And when we hear this story, we remember that there was a time when grandparents were new to each other, and figuring out life together. The story is true, whether it's entirely factual or not.

Stories can provide comfort, shape us, and help us recall joy-filled times in our lives. But our lives are NOT fairy tales. As we live into the real grit and struggle and messiness of life, we know that there are other stories that shape us that aren't so happy Maybe it's a painful experience from your past that has come to define who you are? The story about how your dad left when you were 9, or your child who hasn't spoken to you in 5 years, the year your sister died of cancer, or the time treated your best friend horribly and don't know if you can ever come to a place of reconciliation...?

We wonder, will these stories ever stop having a hold on us? Will they end? Why did they begin? Are we forever living in the middle? Or will we find some clear resolution, some purpose?

What story do we tell about our lives?

And at the end of the day, what about them is true?

The Psalm we heard this morning is one way to encounter these questions. The Book of Psalms is the prayer book in the Bible. Psalms are poems and songs, meant to be recited and sung out loud when the community gathered together to worship. The Psalms are some of my favorite passages in the Bible because they express the whole range of human emotion. They give us permission, in our faith journeys, to be fully honest with God—when we're feeling angry, sad, or worn out...we know from the Psalms that we are safe to express these emotions to God.

With the Psalmist, we can cry out:

- God, why did you forsake me?
- Where are you God?
- Why did my loved one die?
- Why do I feel so alone?
- Why? Why! Why...

We don't have to hide our painful stories from God, even *and especially* when we are worshiping. We stand with Christians over thousands of years who have asked these same questions, sharing their own stories and searching for God. This morning, our Psalm, Psalm 66, is all about worshiping God. The Psalm begins:

*Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of God's name;
give to God glorious praise. Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.'*

Isn't this beautiful?!?! Imagine if we each began our day by singing this song of praise! But when our stories are difficult, when we're in the middle of a painful struggle without clear resolution, or an obvious moral, or end in sight, it's not so easy to pop out of bed singing like a bird at sunrise. In fact, our first reaction is probably to shut that bird out of our room and pull the covers back over our heads! We don't want to *hear* a joyful noise, much less make one!!!

But before we dismiss this Psalm as too Pollyannaish, let's keep moving through it.

*Come and see what the Lord has done: God is awesome in deeds among mortals.
God turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in the One, who rules by might for ever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let the rebellious not exalt themselves.*

Come and see what God had done! The invitation is NOT to a blind worship without knowing God... the invitation is to LISTEN, and remember God's story. We make a joyful noise, not because our lives are perfect or happy in this particular moment, but because we remember WHO GOD IS.

Come and see what God has done: The Psalmist tells the story of God... a God who saved us from captivity, from slavery in Egypt, by parting the red sea and leading the people to the promised land... their feet didn't even get wet as they walked to safety. The Psalmist remembers the story of Exodus, how God promised to save us and then delivered on that promise. And so we praise God. We make a joyful noise because we remember what God has done for us and are confident God will do the same in the future.

And this is what happens when we gather together for worship, week after week, month after month, year after year: We remember God's story and tell it to one another. And we do that by bringing our own stories to this room/sanctuary, week after week, and paying attention to how they are an integral part of God's story.

When we're grieving over a loved one, we remember that Jesus, too, wept when his friend Lazarus died, and we are not alone in our grief. And we remember that God promises us eternal life, so that death is not the end for the one we mourn.

When we are ashamed of something we've done, we remember that God sent Jesus to forgive us, and that we are set free from guilt and sin.

When we share in the communion meal, we remember that Jesus forgives us and invites us to be part of the one body of Christ, no matter what we've done.

When we are too consumed with ourselves, we remember that God calls us to care for the widow and the orphan, that Jesus commands us to give of what we have to the poor, and so we share our tithes and offerings.

When we are feeling self-doubt and loneliness, we sing about God's unconditional love, remembering that we are indeed loved, unconditionally, by the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.

Wherever we are in the stories of our own lives, we come to worship to remember that it is God's story that defines us!! That God is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega. That what feels like beginnings and endings in our lives, doesn't stand up to the eternal hope we find in Jesus Christ.

Starting to see this connection, recognizing how our story is inextricably woven together with God's story.... this begins in worship. In worship, we sing stories of God's grace, we offer ourselves as gifts, we hear God's word in Scripture, and we are sent out seeking peace and justice. And the more we worship, the more stories we tell, the more we listen, the greater God's story becomes.

Here in worship, we recall stories of God's love and salvation through the course of human history, and we proclaim that each and every one of us are forever part of the story of God.

My friends, as we come to the Lord's table this morning, I invite you, this day, to consider re-committing yourself to God,

- by covenanting to live into God's story,
- by really participating in the life of the community,
- by worshipping regularly and thinking about who you can invite to come with you!,
- by attending a small group or Bible study,
- and engaging in mission or service on a regular basis.

For when we remember God's story, we remind ourselves that we are characters in the divine drama. Everyone of us...whether it's your first time at Bethel United, or you've been coming for years...every single one of us is a vital part of God's story. Our stories ARE God's stories, and we are called to live them and share them. To tell God's truth along with our own.

When we gather here, week after week, we remember that we worship a God who promises to never ever let us go. Who covenants to hold onto us with unconditional love in this life and the next. Not even death can separate us from God's love. This is the Good News!

When we worship, we remember the truth that God is narrating the greatest story ever told and WE are characters in this story. And when we remember, we have hope. And when we are a people who live with hope, we can't help but make a joyful noise in all that we do, wherever we go. Amen.

LET US PRAY: Holy God, we come into your house today, bringing all of who we are. We pray to you from the deepest corner of our hearts - and we pray that you might enter our hearts this day with your abundant grace, that you would lead us to glorify you in new ways, as we seek to live into your amazing story this week. Amen.