Tell the Story

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

When I was young, my family moved into a house in Arizona with a pool and no fence. So my parents made a rule about not being in the backyard without a parent until you pass the swimming test. I come from a long line of swimmers, and my grandmother designed that test. I had to tread water for a couple minutes, swim the length of the pool, and then swim that same distance underwater. I could do everything except the underwater swim. I didn't have goggles, and I hated chlorine in my eyes, so I clenched them shut. Every attempt went the same way. I'd make it within a few feet of the wall, panic for air, and then shoot to the surface.

My mother exasperatedly told me I could easily make it if I'd open my eyes when I thought I couldn't go any further. She was right. The moment I saw how close the wall was, holding my breath one more moment was nothing.

I suspect I'm not the only one who lives with clenched eyes. We want bookends, tidy beginnings and endings. We hold our breath, waiting for something to be over. We plan for retirement expecting ease, and then our health fails, or our partner's does, and ease becomes appointments and caregiving with no end date. We plan for our candidate to win, and whichever way Tuesday went, some of us are discovering what it feels like when it doesn't, and some of us are discovering that winning won't fix what we hoped. When we clench and wait for the finish line, we run out of breath. - Today, our readings are about how to keep living fully in the long middle.

Joshua gathers all the tribes at Shechem. The identity of the Hebrew people is changing. They started as the chosen people of God, became enslaved, and then were freed. Most recently they've been a people on the move, and they're about to become a people

settled in a land, living in covenant, experiencing what it feels like to be God's chosen people. Joshua tells them, "Incline your hearts to the LORD." More specifically, he tells them to put away their other gods. This is not a backup plan. These people had a bad track record, and they were probably tempted to keep their options opened, just in case. Joshua practically dares them saying you can't do this half-heartedly. The English language blurs this, but nearly every "you" in this chapter is plural. This is not about individual salvation. It's a whole people deciding together what will hold them together, because their choices shape their children and their children's children. If they purpose now to tell their story, and to keep telling it: where they came from, what God did, who they have been… their decision will also decide who they **WILL** be.

Psalm 78 explains why that matters. Asaph begins, "I will open my mouth in a parable." Then the psalm says why… so that the generations to come, "the children yet unborn," will know, and in their turn tell their children. The word for "recount" is *sāpar*, to tell, to relate, to declare. This is more than preserving information. It is forming the imagination of the next generation. And their purpose is so that they will continue to "set their hope in God." Memory of the past is how hope gets built into the future.

I spent the past few days at our diocesan convention, where the theme was "Read the Book. Tell the story." This convention was centered around our participation in a story that is bigger than our own part in it. The bishop admonished us over and over again to know the stories that have shaped our faith, to know scripture, to know the stories of our families and churches and then find ways to tell those stories as a way to build up the next generation. But Asaph's psalm, and the bishop's message, are both clear that telling the story **includes** the messy bits. The bishop reminded us that the churches, priests, and leadership of our diocese have not always been above reproach. Much of the wealth of our diocese came from our church's participation in slavery. Asaph himself goes on to recount Israel's rebellion, grumbling, and forgetting. God's faithfulness isn't worth much

without our need for it. Honest storytelling means not neglecting to tell the stories we wince at. The book of Joshua is one of them. We can tell those stories as this is how a people understood God in their time, and this is where we wrestle. That honesty makes the story both relatable and genuinely hopeful.

Paul writes to people who know what happens when the story gets hard. The Thessalonians had waited longer than they expected for Christ's return. Their friends had been killed. They needed something to hold onto and Paul writes so they won't "grieve as others do who have no hope." He doesn't forbid grief, he tempers it. His imagery is vivid and public and cosmic with trumpets, clouds, and the dead raised to life. It's the apocalyptic language Scripture uses when God acts decisively, not a technical diagram of the afterlife. He ends, "Therefore encourage one another." The Greek is *parakaleō*: to comfort, exhort, and strengthen. The promise is that we will be reunited in Christ. And the work that gives the church in the present is to be a community. One where grief is permitted, where hope is shared, and no one is treated as forgotten by God.

Then Jesus tells a parable, and it's a hard one. Matthew was written decades after the resurrection, after the Temple was destroyed, by a community living with conflict and loss and no idea how long it would last. Their bridegroom was delayed. Matthew recounts Jesus' parable of ten bridesmaids, in a world without electric lights, whose job was to light the way for a wedding party and the whole community who joined them. The wait takes longer than anyone planned and five run out of oil. And because they were part of the ceremony, their failure affected everyone.

I wish Jesus had told us what the oil is, but he doesn't. The parable never says what they should have done, only that they should have expected things to go differently than planned. The wise women refuse to share their oil. If they had, all ten lamps would have burned for half the time. That isn't selfishness, it's planning for an unknown future. It's telling us that some things can't be handed over at the last minute. And also notice that

all ten fell asleep. Faithfulness isn't transcending the limitations of human flesh. It is planning for the long haul - and then having what you need when that shout comes. The Greek word in Jesus' admonition more literally means to keep alert. That is the singular message of this parable. Even when things don't go as planned and when they take longer than expected, be ready and watchful.

So here is what I'm thinking. You can't hand someone your oil at midnight. But you can spend the long ordinary evenings teaching them what happens without oil and why it's important to have more than you think you'll need. Telling the story, remembering, and preparing, is how a community stocks their lamps before the oil runs out.

We all participate in this. If you are a parent or grandparent, the children are right there. If you aren't, you are still someone's ancestor in the faith, and others around you are watching to see if you're holding your breath. To those of us who are certain how the story ends, and those who aren't, Joshua says choose, together. What does a plan look like that privileges the longevity of faithfulness, for ourselves and our community? How are we living our lives as part of the bigger story, directed toward it, anticipating what is to come, teaching and preparing those who will come after?

Which brings me back to that pool. Let us all open our eyes. See how close the wall is, and how many have swum this length before us. The Bridegroom is coming, and the night may be long. But we are not holding our breath alone, and we don't have to.

In a moment we'll do what Asaph asked. We will tell the story of creation, promise, cross, resurrection, and the promise of Christ's return, with bread and wine in our hands, so that those who come after us will know.

May we be a people who recognize that we are part of a bigger story, and may we participate in that story for our community and for those who will follow.