

Your Story, Our Story, God's Story - Reader

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STORY themed Sermons, the Reader, and related resources can be found on the church website: peaceofplymouth.org

Acknowledgments:

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All Bible quotes are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

INTRODUCTION

“In the beginning...,” “Long, long ago, in a kingdom far, far away...,” “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” A good story always draws us in. And we are changed by hearing it.

Sixty years ago, the average dinnertime was ninety minutes; today, it is less than twelve minutes. We have lost many places where we tell stories, where we hear stories, where our identity is formed.

This year, we are going to gather around story—God’s story and your story. In his TED talk, David Isay, the creator of a national storytelling project called StoryCorps, says the following: “In an age where it can be hard to know what’s real and what’s an advertisement, listening to another person’s story can be an experience that is authentic and pure. It can feel like you are standing on holy ground.”

As people of faith, we couldn’t agree more. Our agreement comes directly from our confession of faith in the God who has claimed us in Jesus Christ. From the very first verses of scripture, our story declares that God has created us, our neighbors, and those we too often call enemies and called it all good. In these same verses, we hear that we are called to tend to God’s creation’s well-being. In other words, one of the core confessions undergirding all of scripture is that life matters. This life matters. Your life matters. God calls all of us into God’s story of creation and reconciliation.

In the last year, we have spent time engaging the question of vocation, the idea that in Jesus’ name, we are both claimed and called. In our baptisms, we are renamed as a “Child of God.” In our giftedness and our brokenness, all of us are called to be God’s hands and feet, seeking the well-being of our neighbors.

Undergirding these confessions is another. We confess that God is present and at work in the world; therefore, God is always in the midst of your story and mine. This year we will look back on our story and God’s story, spend time wondering about our present story and God’s presence and call within it and dream about our future story as children of God. We’ll invite you to consider how the significance of your own life story is deepened and shaped by the story of who God is for us in Christ Jesus.

The reader will be used in homes and small groups during the five weeks from Reformation Sunday (the last Sunday in October) through Nov. 22. Each week will invite you to tell different parts of your story from a new perspective. Just as significant as telling your own story is listening to the stories of others in your Peace Lutheran family,

so we hope that relationships will be formed and deepened through simple, weekly gatherings of story- sharing. Beyond the small group gathering, there is also an opportunity each week for private journaling. These practices—journaling and storytelling—will inform and enrich one another. We invite you to try doing both. You may choose to share your journaling during that week’s small group, or it may remain a space for private reflection.

As you anticipate your first small group gathering, take a few moments to watch the TED talk by StoryCorps founder Dave Isay that inspired this entire project! It is not an explicitly “religious” presentation, though we hope it is not too difficult for you to sense the ways in which God is indeed at work through the lives and stories that Isay shares. Thank you for walking this journey with us this year!

EXPLANATION OF SMALL GROUPS & STORY-SHARING TIME

The format of small groups this year is designed to help you share parts of your story, listen well to each other, and reflect on the content provided (scripture and readings). Each week in your small group, it is important to make time for each of the parts below, finding a balance between large group discussion and the more personal story-sharing time with a partner.

You may choose to either switch partners each week or stay with the same person. Group facilitators will need to watch the time for each part. Week 5 culminates in a longer story-sharing time with a partner; this will be explained in Week 4, so you can prepare.

This is the general format of each week:

Opening Reflection

Begin your small group time together by breaking into 2’s or 3’s if uneven number, and check in on any thoughts, questions, or insights from the week. This is a good time for you to share what you have written on the week’s journaling pages if you feel comfortable doing so. The hope is simply that you’ve pondered some of the broader themes from your story and God’s story. Take a few minutes for each person to share and then practice being an engaged, attentive listener**. (10 minutes)

Large Group Discussion

Back in the large group, discuss the questions that pertain to the week's scripture and readings. (20 minutes)

Partner Sharing

Return to your twosome/threesome and look at the story- sharing question. This question takes you a little deeper into your own story, reflecting on this week's topic and allowing you to share and process with your partner's story. Take about 5 minutes for each person to share and then practice being an engaged, attentive listener**. (15 minutes)

Prayer

Conclude back in the large group, connecting to God, one another, and the broader Peace community by asking if there are prayer concerns/joys they'd like to have lifted up...the facilitator that week, or another person, could pray... OR have an open prayer where people may offer their own prayer petitions. Then close by praying together with the Prayer of Good Courage, which is used every week at the end of worship. (5 minutes)

**What is an engaged, attentive listener? It means being present to the one offering a story—hearing and honoring their voice. Thank the person who has spoken; you need not comment or offer an opinion when they have finished. If time allows, you can ask to follow up questions such as “Tell me more about...” or “What did you mean when you said...” and resist comments that begin with “That reminds me of a time...” or “I think you should...” or as Hemingway so plainly put it, *“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.”*

WEEK 1

STORIED WATERS

Introduction

Humans are wired for story. We tell our stories on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram through diaries, and conversation. But what is the story you are telling?

As we form our identity and seek to live out our vocations, those roles that make up our lives, we look for (or create!) stories that help us better understand ourselves, the world around us, and God. But your story is already nestled into a bigger story... God's story. In this Reformation week, we claim the fact once again that our stories all start with a loving and grace-filled God, who is present and active in our lives. In the waters of baptism, we see this God who comes to us and tells us who we are (Beloved Child, a New Creation) and who we are invited to be (Follower of Jesus).

The chapter title, "Storied Waters," reminds us that we each are uniquely born out of the storied waters of our family and our culture, and we are born spiritually, out of the storied waters of scripture... Noah and the flood, the Red Sea, the River Jordan. These stories shape us, along with our life experiences of pain and fear, grief and joy, love, and community.

This week we begin a journey that will help us tell our own stories, come to know more deeply the stories of those around us, and most importantly, will help us see how we are each woven into God's greater story of redemption, where we are all made "a new creation." Because of God's story, your story matters!

Acts 9:1-19

The Conversion of Saul

On the road to Damascus, Christ gives Saul a new identity, a new story. "Stop persecuting me!" Jesus commands. And then God sends Ananias—one of the very people who feared Saul's harsh persecution the most—to forgive Saul and baptize him. Now called Paul, such an experience turns him from his ways of violence and fear towards a new "ministry of reconciliation." Many years later, Paul passes the story of Christ on to the Corinthians, writing: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now, as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days, he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately, something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

In Christ, we have become a New Creation

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us; we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.



Excerpt from *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*

David Lose

David Lose writes his book, Making Sense of the Christian Faith, as a conversation between two people (one voice is indicated in bold print, the other is plain and indented). In this excerpt, the conversation gets into questions of the Bible: How do we read it? How do we understand it? In fact, the Bible is told as one long story—beginning at the very beginning of time and ending at the very end—and we are invited to understand our lives as a part of this unfolding story of God’s people. How might understanding your own story as wrapped up in the Biblical story shape how you will tell it to others?

All right, let’s see if you can place this line: “In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth.”

That’s the way the Bible starts off, isn’t it?

Right. It’s one of the great opening lines in literature.

Right up there with, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.”

It’s interesting you mention Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*. Because I think how you begin something is really important. It tells you a lot about what’s going to come. So Dickens totally sets the tone of his book with that long and carefully crafted first line. I mean, you don’t know at all what’s coming, but you know it’s going to be a bumpy ride. I think something similar is going on with the Bible.

What do you mean?

I think that opening line tells us something important about both the Bible and God.

Okay, I'll bite: What does it tell us about the Bible?

That this is one seriously big story.

Because...?

Because it begins at the very, very beginning, I mean, there's kind of an audacity about saying your story starts at the very beginning—like the story you're about to start is the story, the ultimate story, the story that comes before all other stories and holds all of them within it. And it follows up on the claim by ending...

Let me guess, in the end?

The very end. That's right. The Bible starts at the very beginning and ends at the very end.

Okay, so it's a really big story. I'm still not totally sure why that's such a big deal.

Because written this way, the Bible invites us to see ourselves as part of the story, connected to all the characters we're about to read about. The story begins at the beginning, with the creation of the world. Then, as we'll see, it tells the story of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, of Jesus in the four Gospels, and of the early church in the book called the Acts of the Apostles and a number of early letters, and then it stops. Except it doesn't stop because then it jumps to the very end of history in a book called Revelation. This means the Bible tells this really big story that begins at the very beginning and ends at the very end, and we all live out our lives somewhere between the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation.

Which means that, according to the Bible, we're all characters in this ongoing story?

That's right.

Interesting. If that's true, then I have to say I agree with you—this is one big story. I'm not sure I quite get where you're going with this yet.

That's okay. It's enough that you're willing to go along for the ride.

Excerpt from *From Tablet to Table* Leonard Sweet

“Every person is a story wrapped in skin,” writes theologian Leonard Sweet in our next reading. If we are stories, and our stories are a part of God’s larger story, then we must begin to tell them! Sweet explores how storytelling is always a communal, relational act. When we speak, and when we listen, we are always “[participants] in the bigger story being told by Jesus.”

The best place to tell a story is at a table. When you tell a story, you are transferring your experiences directly to the brains of those listening; they feel what you feel, think what you think, smell what you smell. You are teleporting your story to their brain. Research on the brain activity of storytellers demonstrates that their audience’s brain patterns can start to mimic their own. Professional storytellers tell of getting an audience into a “story trance;” people so come under the spell of a story that they start breathing together, nodding their heads in unison, gasping in unison, smiling in unison, moving eyes in unison. It’s almost as if they are reenacting the story in real-time. Could this be what it means to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus?” (Philippians 2:5). By the telling and retelling of the Jesus story, God syncs our mind with Christ.

It is important for each one of us to tell our story and hear each other’s stories. Every person is a story wrapped in skin. Moreover, everyone lives multi-storied lives; as our lives intersect, so do our stories, and new stories splinter out from each encounter. As the old country song put it, “We live in a two-story house. She’s got her story, and I’ve got mine.” But the ultimate story is the Jesus story of what God has done in the past, is doing in the present, and will do in the future. It’s that story that binds all our stories together.

What we need more than anything else is not more storybooks but more story people—people who together participate in the bigger story being told by Jesus. We need to tell a bigger story with our life than the story of ourselves. Our stories should point not just to ourselves but to Christ. If storytelling is brain-syncing, then telling God’s story is God-syncing. As we gather around the table, we learn to live well-storied lives and connect our story to God’s story.

Works Cited

Lose, David J. *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2010.

Sweet, Leonard. *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found, and Identity Is Formed*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015.

Journaling questions to write or reflect on this week:

- Think of one of your favorite Bible stories and describe what in the story touches you, intrigues you...challenges you.
- What is the image of God/Jesus in that story?
- Has your image of God changed as your life story has unfolded? If so, how?

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Week 1, Small Group & Story-Sharing Time

If you have not read through the “Explanation of Small Group & Story-Sharing Time” that precedes Week 1, please do so.

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

Remain in the large group for the opening this week so you can begin getting to know one another, a bit. Begin by sharing the “opening paragraph” of your story. You could also choose to share any reflections you have written down to this week’s journaling questions.

In the David Lose reading, he talked about the importance of how a story begins. As God’s people, our story begins in Genesis 1, but your unique piece in that greater narrative began in another place and time, with certain people and unique circumstances. Share the opening paragraph (1 minute) of your story....include the location, characters, your baptism.

Large Group Discussion (20 minutes)

- The Bible is a storybook...God’s story and our story. Do you hear it as story? If not, how have you viewed it? How might you find it helpful to see it as a story with a beginning (Genesis) and an ending (Revelation), with some blank pages towards the end where YOUR story is written? Might you see your life differently, knowing it was a part of God’s great story?
- Looking at the first scripture reading of Paul’s conversion in Acts...Have you ever known anyone who has changed radically, taken on a whole new identity? Name some characters in history or literature who went through a radical change, whose story took a whole new direction at some point. Why might God have chosen Saul, i.e. what are some of Saul’s characteristics that God was able to use in a new way?
- If we are all stories wrapped in skin, as Sweet says, name some of the places where your story is told, and with whom. For example, if someone only knew you through your Facebook page or Twitter account, your neighborhood or your job, what part of your story is being told?...and not told? What are the stories of others that you are hearing/seeing in these places? Reflect on ‘where’ or ‘if’ you are hearing pieces of faith stories...from yourself, and from others.

Partner Sharing (15 minutes)

Now break into 2's or 3's and think about what stories from your family history or childhood tell you who you are and give some shape to your own story. Share one of those stories with your partner/s, taking 3-5 minutes each, and tell why that story connects with you or is important to you.

Prayer

Back in the large group, we connect to God, one another and the larger Peace community:

- See if there are prayer concerns/joys others would like to have lifted up...the facilitator this week, or another person, could pray...OR have an open prayer where you offer your own prayer petitions.
- Close by praying together the Prayer of Good Courage, laying our stories in the hands of a loving God...

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEEK 2

SWEPT UP IN GOD'S STORY

Introduction

This week is laid before us like an intricate mosaic, made up of broken, beautiful, and jagged pieces. Jesus welcomes children, who were regarded as little more than a nuisance at this point in history. He points to the ignored, forgotten ones and says “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” Like he always does, Jesus obliterates the perimeters of our social norms, he points beyond what we hold dear, he gathers up the forgotten and shame-filled pieces of our world and of our stories and he claims it all within the framework of the kingdom of God.

This week begins with All Saints Sunday, the day of the church year when we remember the saints who have died. However, we do not only look to the past on this day; we also praise God for our current place in the family of God and for our future place in the communion of all the saints. This may, at first hearing, sound lovely, complete with harps and angels’ wings—but All Saints Sunday is a broken, beautiful day with jagged edges too! As members of this communion, all of who we are is swept up into the wide and gracious mercy of our God: the good and the bad, the saint and the sinner, the beautiful and the broken.

After all, none of us has received the gift of faith by our own strengths or merits. Has anyone ever received their faith in a nice, tidy package—without doubt, without trials, without complication? No. Every gift of faith comes through families and generational inheritance. We come to know God through Christ because of the witness of so many people and as a result of experiences, painful and joyful. God’s mosaic kingdom is full of our complicated lives, reflective of our family trees or scrapbooks.

This week we will remember the saints (and sinners!) of our lives who have witnessed to God’s amazing grace, and we will tell stories of receiving faith, living in faith and hopefully discover the wide, outrageous welcome of the God of all generations.

LUKE 18:15-27

The Little Children and the Rich Ruler

Hopeful parents, vulnerable children, confused disciples, and “wise” rulers all seek out Jesus in this important moment of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus addresses and loves them all, though the faith he calls them to is not without complication and risk. How have you heard God’s call across the decades and stations of your own life?

People were bringing even infants to him that Jesus might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

A certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

Excerpt from *Whistling in the Dark*

Frederick Buechner

In this short passage from his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner helps us to imagine how our weekly worship unites us across time and space to all of God's saints, living and dead. Even the birds play a part in this sacred moment! It is an imperfect picture, but it is holy nonetheless. How does Sunday worship connect you to the communion of saints to which you belong? Buechner's scene is of Holy Communion—are there other parts of worship that remind you of your part in God's story?

AT THE ALTAR TABLE, the overweight parson is doing something or other with the bread as his assistant stands by with the wine. In the pews, the congregation sits more or less patiently waiting to get into the act. The church is quiet. Outside, a bird starts singing. It's nothing special, only a handful of notes angling out in different directions. Then a pause. Then a trill or two. A chirp. It is just warming up for the business of the day, but it is enough.

The parson and his assistant and the usual smattering of senior citizens, parents, and teenagers are not alone in whatever they think they're doing. Maybe that is what the bird is there to remind them. In its own slapdash way the bird has a part in it too. Not to mention "Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven" if the prayer book is to be believed. Maybe we should believe it. Angels and Archangels. Cherubim and seraphim. They are all in the act together. It must look a little like the great *jeu de son et lumiere* at Versailles when all the fountains are turned on at once and the night is ablaze with fireworks. It must sound a little like the last movement of Beethoven's Choral Symphony or the Atlantic in a gale.

And "all the company of heaven" means everybody we ever loved and lost, including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them or didn't love at all. It means people we never heard of. It means everybody who ever did—or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will—come together at something like this table in search of something like what is offered at it.

Whatever other reasons we have for coming to such a place, if we come also to give each other our love and to give God our love, then together with Gabriel and Michael, and the fat parson, and Sebastian pierced with arrows, and the old lady whose teeth don't fit, and Teresa in her ecstasy, we are the communion of saints.



Two Eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin

King Hussein and Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof

It is important to remember the saints who have gone before us. We do this by telling stories. One of the first places we begin telling the story of a loved one after they die is at the funeral service. When we die, we entrust to others the telling of our story.

Following are two different eulogies given for the same person, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, after Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish ultra-nationalist in 1995. The first is given by a former opponent and fellow statesman of Rabin's, who had become partners with him in working for lasting peace in the Middle East. The second is given by Rabin's granddaughter. The stories they tell are different, but they paint a picture of the same man. Do you think your life story would be told differently from the perspectives of your sibling? co-worker? child? spouse? neighbor? How would these different people in your life remember you differently, or the same?

Eulogy #1 - King Hussein of Jordan

My friends, I had never thought that the moment would come, like this, when I would grieve the loss of a brother, a colleague and a friend, a man, a soldier, whom I trust on the opposite side of a divide, whom I respected as he respected us—a man I came to know because I realized, as he did, that we have to cross over the divide, establish a dialogue, get to know each other and strive to leave for those who follow us a legacy that is worthy of them. And so we did. And so we became brethren and friends.

I've never been used to standing, except with you next to me, speaking of peace, speaking of our dreams and the hopes of generations to come that must live in peace, enjoy human dignity, come together, work together to build a better future, which is our right.

You lived as a soldier; you died as a soldier for peace.

And I believe it is time for all of us to come out openly and to speak of peace. Not here today, but for all the times to come. We belong to the camp of peace. We believe in peace. We believe that our one God wishes us to live in peace, and wishes peace upon us, for these are His teachings to all the followers of the three great monotheistic religions, the children of Abraham.

Let's not keep silent...we are not ashamed, nor are we afraid, nor are we anything but determined to fulfill the legacy for which my friend fell, as did my grandfather in this very city when I was with him and but a boy.

He was a man of courage...and he was endowed with one of the greatest virtues that any man can have. He was endowed with humility. He felt, with those around him, an evolution of responsibility. He placed himself, as I do, and have done often, in the place of the other partner to achieve a worthy goal. And we achieved peace, an honorable peace and a lasting peace.

He had courage, he had vision, and he had a commitment to peace. And standing here, I commit before you, before my people in Jordan, before the world, myself to continue to do my utmost to insure that we leave a similar legacy. And when my time comes, I hope it will be like my grandfather's and like Yitzhak Rabin's.

For his spirit—and I try and make sense for the people of Jordan, my family, the people of Israel—decent people throughout the world feel today. So many live and so many inevitably die. This is the will of God, this is the way of all, but those are fortunate and lucky in life, those who are great and those who leave something behind and you are such a man, my friend.

The faces in my country, among the majority of our people, and our armed forces and people who once were your enemies, are somber today and their hearts are heavy. Let's hope and pray that God will give us all guidance, each in his respective position, to do what he can for the better future that Yitzhak Rabin sought with determination and courage.

Eulogy #2 - Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof

Please excuse me for not wanting to talk about the peace. I want to talk about my grandfather.

You always awake from a nightmare, but since yesterday I was continually awakening to a nightmare. It is not possible to get used to the nightmare of life without you. The television never ceases to broadcast pictures of you, and you are so alive that I can almost touch you—but only almost, and I won't be able to anymore.

Grandfather, you were the pillar of fire in front of the camp and now we are left in the camp alone, in the dark; and we are so cold and so sad.

I know that people talk in terms of a national tragedy, and of comforting an entire nation, but we feel the huge void that remains in your absence when my grandmother doesn't stop crying.

Few people really knew you. Now they will talk about you for quite some time, but I feel that they really don't know just how great the pain is, how great the tragedy is; something has been destroyed.

Grandfather, you were and still are our hero. I wanted you to know that every time I did anything, I saw you in front of me. Your appreciation and your love accompanied us every step down the road, and our lives were always shaped after your

values. You, who never abandoned anything, are now abandoned. And here you are, my ever present hero, cold, alone, and I cannot do anything to save you. You are missed so much.

Others greater than I have already eulogized you, but none of them ever had the pleasure I had to feel the caresses of your warm, soft hands, to merit your warm embrace that was reserved only for us, to see your half-smile that always told me so much, that same smile which is no longer, frozen in the grave with you.

I have no feelings of revenge because my pain and feelings of loss are so large, too large. The ground has been swept out from below us, and we are groping now, trying to wander about in this empty void, without any success so far.

I am not able to finish this; left with no alternative, I say good-bye to you, hero, and ask you to rest in peace, and think about us, and miss us, as down here we love you so very much. I imagine angels are accompanying you now and I ask them to take care of you, because you deserve their protection.

You may access the following video resources by clicking on the title.

David Brooks, TED Talk

“Should you live for your resume or your eulogy?”

The first of these videos is a short TED Talk given by New York Times columnist, David Brooks. In it, he raises the question: Should you live for your resume or your eulogy? Brooks believes it's the latter, as we ultimately tend to be remembered more for our relationships, our compassion, and our character than for our achievements or ambitions.

STORYCORPS

Miss Devine

In the second video, listen to two adults remember their childhood Sunday school teacher, Miss Devine. Think about a person like Miss Devine in your own life who shared God's love with you, and share this story in your small group time this week.

WORKS CITED

Buechner, Frederick. "*Communion of Saints*," last accessed August 25, 2015,
<http://frederickbuechner.com/page-group/landing/quote/QoD-Communion-of-Saints>

Schwehn, Mark R., and Dorothy C. Bass. *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006

Journaling questions to write or reflect on this week:

- You have read and heard a lot about mortality this week, as we've experienced All Saints Sunday and read a few eulogies. Think about phrases or descriptors that might be spoken at your funeral...what comes to mind?
- What feels important as you reflect on this? Is there anything that suddenly becomes less important?

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Week 2, Small Group & Story-Sharing Time

If you have not read through the “Explanation of Small Group & Story-Sharing Time” that precedes Week 1, please do so.

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

Get into groups of 2 or 3 and discuss the questions found on the journaling page for this week (page 20). Share what you wrote along with the experience of reflecting on these questions about story and mortality.

Large Group Discussion (20 minutes)

- This week’s readings, especially the scene from Luke’s gospel, tell of the complex, diverse nature of the kingdom of God. Can you imagine that the entire complex, diverse dimensions of your story is indeed called into this mosaic-kingdom?
- Remember the two different eulogies given for the same person, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, after Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish ultra-nationalist in 1995. The first is given by a former opponent and fellow statesman of Rabin’s, who had become partners with him in working for lasting peace in the Middle East. The second is given by Rabin’s granddaughter. The stories they tell are different, but they paint a picture of the same man. Do you think your life story would be told differently from the perspectives of your sibling? co-worker? child? spouse? neighbor? How would these different people in your life remember you differently, or the same?

Partner Sharing (15 minutes)

We all come to faith because of the grace of God and because of the experiences and people in our lives. Share a story about someone from your life (living or deceased) who shared God’s love with you. This can be a profound encounter or fleeting moments, for the ways of God are mysterious.

Prayer

Back in the large group, we connect to God, one another and the larger Peace community:

- See if there are prayer concerns/joys others would like to have lifted up...the facilitator this week, or another person, could pray...OR have an open prayer where you offer your own prayer petitions.
- Close by praying together the Prayer of Good Courage, laying our stories in the hands of a loving God...

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEEK 3

YOUR STORY IS BIGGER THAN YOU

Introduction

In his book, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, the Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce examined what makes life meaningful. Atul Gawande summarizes his findings this way: “The answer...is that we all seek a cause beyond ourselves. The important thing was that, in ascribing value to the cause and seeing it as worth making sacrifices for, our lives become meaningful.” This “cause beyond ourselves” that provides meaning Royce referred to as “loyalty.”

It’s interesting to compare his argument with the story of Zacchaeus. After his encounter with Jesus, it’s clear that Zacchaeus’ life changes. He now sees his life as a part of something much larger than himself. What’s interesting is that this new loyalty is reflected in how he is re-oriented to the resources at his disposal. First, Zacchaeus repents of the ways he has defrauded his neighbors, and commits to re-paying them 4 times what he owes. Second, he commits to giving half his resources to the poor. In other words, his change of loyalty—the sense that his story is part of a larger story—has had a dramatic effect on how he views, and distributes, his resources.

This week we invite you to wonder about the loyalties in your story. Is there a “cause larger than yourself” that provides meaning in your life? How do these loyalties affect the way you use your time, talents, and financial resources? Along with the reading on Zacchaeus and from Gawande, we invite you to reflect on the story of Angie and the interview from StoryCorps. Notice the ways in which larger narratives have influenced how these people view the use of their gifts and resources for the sake of their neighbor and world. Finally, on this week in which we prayerfully consider how we share our resources with our Peace pledge, where do your loyalties lie? How does that affect the use and allocation of your time, talents, and financial resources throughout your whole life?

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus and Zacchaeus

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."



Excerpt from *Being Mortal*

Atul Gawande

*Atul Gawande, a surgeon and author, explores questions related to mortality and end-of-life care in his book, **Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End**. Gawande combines decades of experience as a doctor with recent research to argue that medicine has too often ignored the things that matter most to patients in their final years, weeks, and days of life. The result is always increased suffering.*

Here Gawande discusses how profoundly a sense of purpose and loyalty to something larger than ourselves impacts our quality of life. As you reflect on your own life, begin to consider what your loyalties are. How would your quality of life be different without these loyalties?

In 1908, a Harvard philosopher named Josiah Royce wrote a book with the title *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. Royce was not concerned with the trials of aging. But he was concerned with a puzzle that is fundamental to anyone contemplating his or her mortality. Royce wanted to understand why simply existing—why being merely housed and fed and safe and alive—seems empty and meaningless to us. What more is it that we need in order to feel that life is worthwhile?

The answer, he believed, is that we all seek a cause beyond ourselves. This was, to him, an intrinsic human need. The cause could be large (family, country, principle) or small (a building project, the care of a pet). The important thing was that, in ascribing value to the cause and seeing it as worth making sacrifices for, we give our lives meaning.

Royce called this dedication to a cause beyond oneself loyalty. He regarded it as the opposite of individualism. The individualist puts self-interest first, seeing his own pain, pleasure, and existence as his greatest concern. For an individualist, loyalty to causes that have nothing to do with self-interest is strange. When such loyalty encourages self-sacrifice, it can even be alarming—a mistaken and irrational tendency that leaves people open to the exploitation of tyrants. Nothing could matter more than self-interest, and because when you die you are gone, self-sacrifice makes no sense.

Royce had no sympathy for the individualist view. “The selfish we had always with us,” he wrote. “But the divine right to be selfish was never more ingeniously defended.” In fact, he argued, human beings need loyalty. It does not necessarily produce happiness, and can even be painful, but we all require devotion to something more than ourselves for our lives to be enduring. Without it, we have only our desires to guide us, and they are fleeting, capricious, and insatiable. They provide, ultimately, only torment. “By nature, I am a sort of meeting place of countless streams of ancestral tendency. From moment to moment ... I am a collection of impulses,” Royce observed. “We cannot see the inner light. Let us try the outer one.”

And we do. Consider the fact that we care deeply about what happens to the world after we die. If self-interest were the primary source of meaning in life, then it wouldn't matter to people if an hour after their death everyone they know were to be wiped from the face of the earth. Yet it matters greatly to most people. We feel that such an occurrence would make our lives meaningless.

The only way death is not meaningless is to see yourself as part of something greater: a family, a community, a society. If you don't, mortality is only a horror. But if you do, it is not. Loyalty, said Royce, “solves the paradox of our ordinary existence by showing us outside of ourselves the cause which is to be served, and inside of ourselves the will which delights to do this service, and which is not thwarted but enriched and expressed in such service.” In more recent times, psychologists have used the term “transcendence” for a version of this idea. Above the level of self-actualization in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, they suggest the existence in people of a transcendent desire to see and help other beings achieve their potential.

As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures—companionship, everyday routines, the taste of good food, the warmth of sunlight on our faces. We become less interested in the rewards of achieving and accumulating, and more interested in the rewards of simply being. Yet while we may feel less ambitious, we also become concerned for our legacy. And we have a deep need to identify purposes outside ourselves that make living feel meaningful and worthwhile.



Excerpt from *Breathing Space*

Heidi Neumark

Heidi Neumark, a pastor in New York City, tells the following story of an unforgettable former parishioner, Angie. Angie's journey towards health and wholeness is all about her faith, a faith which supplies her with many loyalties: profound and true reasons to continue living in hope. Pay attention to how Angie's loyalties span the intensely local (her health, those who suffer), the communal (the church), and the universal ("because Jesus Christ lives in me!").

The first time I visited [her], Angie was in her bathrobe lying on a couch, downed by depression over her childhood when her father would come into her room at night and violate her, depression over wasted years getting high to numb the pain and doing anything to get by, depression over her HIV status. Angie sent her son, Tiriq, to our summer program a few years ago, just to get him out of the house so she could be uninterrupted on the couch.

On the summer program application form, Angie had noted her interest in baptism for Tiriq, the reason for my visit. We prepared for the baptism and read of the God who...out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead...made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him (Ephesians 2:4ff). Bit by bit Angie rose up, coming to worship, to Bible study, to volunteer at our shelter where homeless people can eat good food and sleep in warm beds each Wednesday night.

She enrolled, along with adults from around our synod, in a two-year Christian leadership class called Diakonia. Angie, a highly intelligent woman, absorbed it all with growing excitement.

Everyone in the class had to give a presentation on Lutheran theology, telling why they were Lutheran. One night, the students assigned to present were absent, and

the pastor teaching the class asked if anyone would be willing to step in. No one was, because they didn't have their written papers at hand since it wasn't their turn. Evidently they needed their notes to remind them of why they were Lutheran. Except for Angie. Her paper wasn't prepared, but she was. "It is living, no rather dying, suffering and facing damnation, not thinking, reading and speculating that makes a theologian," said Luther. Angie had that covered.

Angie got a glass of water and set it in front of her. Then she slowly opened a Mary Kay jewelry case and took out a pink pouch which was filled with multi-colored pills. She took out about ten pills and swallowed them, one by one, in silence. The class was riveted by this unusual theological presentation. When the last pill was swallowed, Angie stood up. "That's my HIV medication," she said. "I'm Lutheran because the church welcomed me as I am, an HIV-positive, recovering addict, and a child of God filled with grace. Taking care of my health is part of my stewardship. Now, by the grace of God I want to live. I want to live for my son. I want to live for the people still out there on the streets as I was. I want to live because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me. It's not just my body anymore. I'm part of his body, a temple of the Holy Spirit." Then this budding Lutheran theologian sat down.

You may access the following online resources by clicking on the title.

David Brooks, TED Talk

"What was going through your head when you first saw me?"

As you listen to this intimate interview, identify the loyalties that Albert hopes to instill in his son, Aidan, as he grows. What are they—politically, socially, personally, professionally? Spend some time thinking about the final piece of wisdom that Albert gives: "I want to see you live with your hands unfolded." What does such a posture look like in your own life? Are there gifts or resources you possess that you continue to hold onto with clenched fists, rather than offering them to the world with open hands?

WORKS CITED

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. 1 edition. Metropolitan Books, 2014.

Neumark, Heidi. *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Journaling questions to write or reflect on this week:

- Both the Zacchaeus story and the story of Angie are similar in that their confession is expressed not only in words, but in the orientation of their resources (time, talent, financial resources, tending to health etc.).
- Look back over the last month, your calendar and your online banking statement. If someone who didn't know you did this kind of audit, where would they say your loyalties lie?
- Did anything about this exercise surprise you?

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Week 3, Small Group & Story-Sharing Time

Opening Reflection (15 minutes)

- Gather with your partner (a twosome, or threesome if needed). Last week, as we reflected on the lives of those who have gone before us, or even on the end of our own life, questions of “what really matters” likely surfaced. This week that same question is framed differently, as we look at the “loyalties” in our life. First, share any insights or journaling from this week. Then, take a moment and name one “loyalty” you hold, along with any stories from your life that might explain why this loyalty is so important to you.

Large Group Discussion (20 minutes)

- There is a brief interview on StoryCorps between a father and son, Albert and Aidan Sykes, entitled “What was going through your head when you first saw me?” Listen to that if you can, on a phone or laptop, and identify the loyalties that Albert hopes to instill in his son as he grows. What are they - politically, socially, personally, professionally? Spend some time thinking about the final piece of wisdom that Albert gives: “I want to see you live with your hands unfolded.” What does such a posture look like in your own life? Are there gifts or resources you possess that you continue to hold onto with clenched fists, rather than offering them to the world with open hands?
- Reflecting back on Angie’s journey in the Heidi Neumark reading, how does your own faith in God shape and form your loyalties? What person, event, Bible story shapes your reasons for giving?

Partner Sharing (15 minutes)

- As you are invited to prayerfully make a financial commitment this week to the ministries that are a part of Peace, or happen through the gifts our congregation gives, consider how what really matters in your life is reflected in your pledge. If you’re comfortable, you might share where this giving has been a joy, or a struggle, for you. Do your loyalties end up being different than your priorities...for how you spend your time?...your money?

Prayer

Back in the large group, we connect to God, one another and the larger Peace community:

- See if there are prayer concerns/joys others would like to have lifted up...the facilitator this week, or another person, could pray...OR have an open prayer where you offer your own prayer petitions. Close by praying together the Prayer of Good Courage, laying our stories in the hands of a loving God...

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEEK 4

OUR STORIES ARE MESSY

Introduction

In one of the readings on the next pages, Parker Palmer writes, “As the darkness began to descend on me in my early twenties, I thought I had developed a unique and terminal case of failure. I did not realize that I had merely embarked on a journey toward joining the human race.” When the shadowy pieces of our stories surface, we can wonder where we went wrong, but one doesn’t need to dig too deep before realizing that all of our stories are “messy.” We all live in the land of broken toys, and some of this brokenness is our own doing. Yet, much of it simply happens; it is beyond our control.

This week we will see how it is that God works within and through these messy stories of ours, continually seeking to bring about redemption, to offer forgiveness, to instill hope. We will wonder if the fact that our stories are woven into God’s greater story might give us a new way of seeing our lives. Perhaps we might even learn to tell the painful parts of our story in the hope of God’s reconciling mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Consider, for example, The Woman at the Well, the protagonist in our Gospel story this week. She is really US, isn’t she?—a person who doesn’t feel like she’s worth Jesus’ time! And yet, even though Jesus knows intimately the messy and broken parts of her story, Jesus promises this unnamed woman something that gives her a new way of seeing herself, others and God. Jesus makes her a part of God’s story—his story!

This week we face the messy chapters of our stories, knowing that God’s own story got messy. Betrayal, abandonment, accusations, and death itself defined a piece of Jesus’ life. But we find hope in the fact that Jesus’ story didn’t end there...and neither does ours. We live at the foot of the cross, knowing that Easter is coming. Despite our best efforts to author our own story, in the end it is only God who can bring about resurrection, hope and healing. What promise! What grace! What a story!

JOHN 4:5-30, 39-42

Jesus and the Woman at the Well

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food). The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans). Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."



Excerpt from *From Tablet to Table*

Leonard Sweet

Beginning to tell the messy parts of our story means entering into a practice of truth-telling. It is easy to omit the harder, more complicated parts of our story when we tell it to others. In the next reading, Leonard Sweet talks about "truth" as "a state of not being hidden." God desires that we come out from the places where we try to hide the broken and more shameful parts of ourselves. Just as God shows Godself to us— unhidden—in the person of Jesus Christ, God desires that we reveal the full truth of who we are to God and to one another. At the end of this reading, Sweet writes, "By laying bare and facing the worst of ourselves, we reveal the very best of ourselves." What does he mean by this paradox? When have you experienced the "transparency of truth" in your own life?

Table Manners

Authenticity. Truth. Every table must have it.

When you hear the word truth, what comes to mind? If the first thing that pops into your head is a statement, or you start mentally searching for a proposition or principle or philosophy, that's not Christianity, that's another religion. Christianity has a very different understanding of truth.

Aletheia is one of those Greek words every Christian should know. It means "truth," but...every word is distilled from a backstory, which is derived from a root metaphor. So what is the backstory and root metaphor of *aletheia*?

Aletheia literally means "unhiding," the state of "not being hidden." The root metaphor of "truth," then, is coming out of hiding. To live the truth is to reveal one's presence and personage, to "unconceal" oneself.

The originating story of Christianity (and its antecedent, Judaism) has an *aletheia* moment. One day God gets ready to do God's favorite thing: walk and talk in the garden with Adam and Eve as they ask "How does our garden grow?" kinds of questions. But no one is around. "Adam, Eve, where are you?" God asks.

From the shadows comes a voice: "We're hiding."

Thus the first untruth, the first lie, is that our sin has made God our enemy.

"Adam, Eve, why are you hiding?"

"We're naked." This is the second untruth, the second lie: We are unsafe in our unguarded state. We're hiding from ourselves. We suffer from a broken relationship with ourselves.

"Adam, Eve, why did you eat that pomegranate?" (Whatever the fruit really was, it wasn't an apple).

"Eve, the woman you gave me, made me do it," Adam says. "The serpent made me do it," Eve says. This is the third untruth, the third lie: We are better off alone. We're hiding from each other. We suffer from a broken relationship with one another.

"Adam, Eve," God says, "You break my heart. Life is truth or consequences. You've made your choice. Now here are the consequences: Out of the garden. Out of Eden."

This fourth untruth, partially exposed in Eve's relationship with the serpent, is that there is no place for us. We're hiding from the ground we came from and the garden God put us in. We're hiding from the garden planet called Earth that God gave us. We suffer from a broken relationship with creation.

The rest of the Bible is a story of hide and seek: as we hide from God, God seeks us out, to repair and redeem us in those four broken relationships, those four lies. God's mission in the world is to restore to relationship a hard-headed and rebellious people in spite of our attempts to fake a persona to get along with others or to mask our insecurities in drugs and deals, work and wardrobes.

At the apex of this hide-and-seek story God sends us himself in Jesus and calls us to live *aletheia*. A phrase used by Jesus in multiple Gospels is "he showed himself." This is the language of intimacy; it's also the language of truth, of unconcealing. In the Emmaus story, the phrase is the same, although the words are different: At table with two disillusioned followers of the crucified Christ, Jesus "opened the Scriptures" (Luke 24:32) and "their eyes were opened" (v. 31). God had revealed God.

On the cross, Jesus himself sang of a God who "has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help" (Psalm 22:24). On the cross, God turned toward us as far as God could turn. Now it's our turn to turn around (*metanoia*) and come out of hiding—not just to hang out with God like Adam and Eve in Eden, but to let it all hang

out with the God who let it all hang out when he hung on the cross for us, naked, vulnerable, unconcealed.

“He who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the most unhappy man of all.” - Soren Kierkegaard

The greatest word spoken in the Torah is *hineni*, Hebrew for “here I am.” The best-known use is when God calls individuals (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Moses), but even God precedes some actions with the declaration *hineni* (e.g., Isaiah 58:9; 65:1)—here I am, no more hiding, evading, running, or concealing.

In one memorable interaction, Moses sees a bush burn and hears God call, “Moses, Moses!” Moses responds, “*Hineni*.” Then the voice of God instructs Moses to go back to Egypt, a place he had fled only a short time ago, and free the people from enslavement. Moses musters all the courage he can, and says, “Yes, Lord” (Exodus 3). In this and other instances, *hineni* is the precursor to significant action on God’s part, through his willing servants. *Hineni* is, in this respect, both an affect (self-expression indicating emotional readiness) and an effect—the acknowledgement of covenantal responsibility to live a life of truth. To live in truth is to stand before the great I AM in our nakedness and guilt, to reject the temptation to hide from God’s glory. By laying bare and facing the worst of ourselves, we reveal the very best of ourselves. In other words, *aletheia* is *hineni*. Truth is “Here I am.”

The transparency of truth—this is essential for a table to be a table. A table requires that people unconceal themselves from one another, that for all their faults and failures and foibles and fixations, they still say to one another, “Here I am.” When people tell the truth to each other, and when they hear the truth from each other, it is a sacred moment.



Excerpts from *Let Your Life Speak*

Parker Palmer

For writer and teacher Parker Palmer, understanding God's call for us means listening carefully to the stories of our lives. This is a process, a journey, but it is one that we cannot walk alone. Nor is it one free of missteps and mistakes. Palmer suggests that the better we are at naming the darkness in our own lives, the better we become at accompanying our fellow travelers through theirs.

Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being. If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience—a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth—we will receive the guidance we need to live more authentic lives.

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for “wholeness” is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of.

In the chapters to come, I speak often of my own mistakes—of wrong turns I have taken, of misreadings of my own reality—for hidden in these moments are important clues to my own vocation. I do not feel despondent about my mistakes...though I grieve the pain they have sometimes caused others...I have no idea how I would have learned the truth about myself and my calling without the mistakes I have made, though by that measure I should have written a much longer book!

Journey Into Darkness

Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free “travel packages” sold by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage—a transformative journey to a sacred center” full of hardships, darkness, and peril.

In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost—challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is

here and now—in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep within our own hearts.

But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is not the whole of the story—every pilgrimage has passages of loveliness and joy—but it is the part of the story most often left untold. When we finally escape the darkness and stumble into the light, it is tempting to tell others that our hope never flagged, to deny those long nights we spent cowering in fear.

The experience of darkness has been essential to my coming into selfhood, and telling the truth about that fact helps me stay in the light. But I want to tell that truth for another reason as well: many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives. When I was young, there were very few elders willing to talk about the darkness; most of them pretended that success was all they had ever known. As the darkness began to descend on me in my early twenties, I thought I had developed a unique and terminal case of failure. I did not realize that I had merely embarked on a journey toward joining the human race.

The story of my journey is no more or less important than anyone else's. It is simply the best source of data I have on a subject where generalizations often fail but truth may be found in the details...

... Some journeys are direct, and some are circuitous; some are heroic, and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.



The Ordinary Miraculous

Cheryl Strayed (AKA “SUGAR”)

For years, writer Cheryl Strayed authored an online advice column under the pseudonym “Sugar.” Her voice became one that people from all around the country trusted with their darkest secrets, doubts, and insecurities. Here Sugar answers an inquirer’s question by sharing about her ongoing process of grief after her mother died of cancer when Sugar was only 21. By telling this story many years later—giving meaning and significance to an otherwise insignificant memory—Sugar is able to arrive at a place of deeper gratitude and trust.

Dear Sugar,

The general mystery of becoming seems like a key idea in many of your columns, of how you don’t know what something will turn out to be until you’ve lived it. It’s made me want to know more. Will you give us a specific example of how something like this has played out in your life, Sugar?

Thank you,
Big Fan

Dear Big Fan,

The summer I was 18, I was driving down a country road with my mother. This was in the rural county where I grew up and all of the roads were country, the houses spread out over miles, hardly any of them in sight of a neighbor. Driving meant going past an endless stream of trees and fields and wildflowers. On this particular afternoon, my mother and I came upon a yard sale at a big house where a very old woman lived alone, her husband dead, her kids grown and gone.

“Let’s look and see what she has,” my mother said as we passed, so I turned the car around and pulled into the old woman’s driveway and the two of us got out.

We were the only people there. Even the old woman whose sale it was didn’t come out of the house, only waving to us from a window. It was August, the last stretch of time that I would live with my mother. I’d completed my first year of college by then and I’d returned home for the summer because I’d gotten a job in a nearby town. In a few weeks I’d go back to college and I’d never again live in the place I called home, though I didn’t know that then.

There was nothing much of interest at the yard sale, I saw, as I made my way among the junk—old cooking pots and worn-out board games; incomplete sets of dishes in faded, unfashionable colors and appalling polyester pants—but as I turned away, just before I was about to suggest that we should go, something caught my eye.

It was a red velvet dress trimmed with white lace, fit for a toddler. “Look at this,” I said and held it up to my mother, who said oh isn’t that the sweetest thing, and I agreed and then set the dress back down.

In a month I’d be nineteen. In a year I’d be married. In three years I’d be standing in a meadow not far from that old woman’s yard holding the ashes of my mother’s body in my palms. I was pretty certain at that moment that I would never be a mother myself. Children were cute, but ultimately annoying, I thought then. I wanted more out of life. And yet, ridiculously, inexplicably, on that day the month before I turned 19, as my mother and I poked among the detritus of someone else’s life, I kept returning to that red velvet dress fit for a toddler. I don’t know why. I cannot explain it even still except to say something about it called powerfully to me. I wanted that dress. I tried to talk myself out of wanting it as I smoothed my hands over the velvet. There was a small square of masking tape near its collar that said \$1.

“You want that dress?” my mother asked nonchalantly, glancing up from her own perusals.

“Why would I?” I snapped, perturbed with myself more than her.

“For someday,” said my mother. “But I’m not even going to have kids,” I argued.

“You can put it in a box,” she replied. “Then you’ll have it, no matter what you do.” “I don’t have a dollar,” I said with finality.

“I do,” my mother said and reached for the dress.

I put it in a box, in a cedar chest that belonged to my mother. I dragged it with me all the way along the scorching trail of my twenties and into my thirties. I had a son and then a daughter. The red dress was a secret only known by me, buried for years among my mother’s best things. When I finally unearthed it and held it again it was like being slapped and kissed at the same time, like the volume was being turned way up and also way down. The two things that were true about its existence had an opposite effect and were yet the same single fact:

My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she'll never know.

My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she'll never know.

How beautiful. How ugly.

How little. How big.

How painful. How sweet.

It's almost never until later that we can draw a line between this and that. There was no force at work other than my own desire that compelled me to want that dress. Its meaning was made only by my mother's death and my daughter's birth. And then it meant a lot. The red dress was the material evidence of my loss, but also of the way my mother's love had carried me forth beyond her, her life extending years into my own in ways I never could have imagined. It was a becoming that I would not have dreamed was mine the moment that red dress caught my eye.

I don't think my daughter connects me to my mother any more than my son does. My mother lives as brightly in my boy child as she does in my girl. But seeing my daughter in that red dress on the second Christmas of her life gave me something beyond words. The feeling I got was like that original double whammy I'd had when I first pulled that dress from the box of my mother's best things, only now it was:

My daughter is wearing a dress that her grandmother bought for her at a yard sale.

My daughter is wearing a dress that her grandmother bought for her at a yard sale.

It's so simple it breaks my heart. How un-special that fact is to so many, how ordinary for a child to wear a dress her grandmother bought her, but how very extraordinary it was to me.

I suppose this is what I mean when I say we cannot possibly know what will manifest in our lives. We live and have experiences and leave people we love and get left by them. People we thought would be with us forever aren't and people we didn't know would come into our lives do. Our work here is to keep faith with that, to put it in a box and wait. To trust that someday we will know what it means, so that when the ordinary miraculous is revealed to us we will be there, standing before the baby girl in the pretty dress, grateful for the smallest things.

Yours,
Sugar

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Journaling questions to write or reflect on this week:

In the Leonard Sweet excerpt, he speaks of the Hebrew word “*Hineni*” meaning “Here I am.” And he states that our openness and ability to tell the truth about ourselves, i.e. to say “Here I am,” is often the precursor to God’s actions.

- Can you stand at the foot of the cross (figuratively) and name something, or even several things, that honestly confess who you are, that tell the truth about a part of your story?
- Close this by writing a prayer, asking for God's continuing activity in your story.

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Week 4, Small Group & Story Sharing Time

Opening Reflection (15 minutes)

- Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard was no stranger to personal tragedy. His mother and five of his six siblings all died (of various illnesses and accidents) before Soren reached his 25th birthday. In his discourse “The Gospel of Sufferings” Kierkegaard wrote, “Faith sees best in the dark.” Do you agree with this? If so, why?...What has your experience been of “seeing” in the dark?
- You may also choose to share any reflections you had from this week’s journaling question.

Large Group Discussion (15 minutes)

- Have you ever considered that YOU ARE the woman at the well in this story from the Gospel of John? It’s easy to dismiss her as a woman who has had many husbands, but what part of her story do you think intersects with yours? Why do you think John told this story in his Gospel (it’s the only Gospel that includes it, and John is always very intentional about why he includes something)? What is the Good News that you hear? What kind of God do we see in this story?
- God desires that we reveal the full truth of who we are to God and to one another. At the end of Sweet’s reading, he writes, “By laying bare and facing the worst of ourselves, we reveal the very best of ourselves.” What does he mean by this paradox? When have you experienced the “transparency of truth” in your own life? Where and with whom is it possible for this to happen in your life?

Partner Sharing (10 minutes)

God uses the dark, messy, broken parts of our stories to make God’s presence known to us, as much or more as those stories in our lives that are easier and more joyful. Share something in your own story that is “messy” (a time of confusion or searching, grief or pain, a time when the storyline of your life was simply not going as you’d planned/hoped), and reflect now on how God was at work, bringing healing, hope, insights in the midst of (or after) that experience.

Prayer

Back in the large group, we connect to God, one another and the larger Peace community:

See if there are prayer concerns/ joys others would like to have lifted up...the facilitator this week, or another person, could pray...OR have an open prayer where you offer your own prayer petitions. Close by praying together the Prayer of Good Courage, laying our stories in the hands of a loving God...

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTE for next week: Your last Small Group session is largely a time in your twosome/threesome where a longer personal story is shared. Please look ahead at the “Telling Your Story” questions in Week 5 so you can give it some thought ahead of time.

WEEK 5

TELLING YOUR STORY

Introduction

For the fifth and final week of this reader, we are inviting you one more time to tell a story from your life in light of the faith you have received in Jesus Christ. How do you understand your story—your calling—as an integral part of God’s unfolding story of creation, reconciliation, and love?

In this reader, we have considered the promise of God in Jesus Christ that graciously makes us a part of God’s story and promises that God is present in ours. We have wondered about how we are all swept up into God’s story, both in life and in death. We have reflected upon the question of our loyalties (the cause larger than ourselves that provides meaning), and we’ve practiced confessing the brokenness in all of our stories with truth and authenticity.

Consider the story of Anna and Simeon from Luke 2:25-38. At the end of their lives, they give profound confessions of faith at the experience of touching (and being touched by) the Christ child. This single encounter revealed to them how their life stories had been caught up in the larger story of God’s love for the world all along. The promises made to them by this loving God blessed their lives with a deep sense of peace, meaning, and a sure and lasting hope. Indeed, their hope had not been in vain; God kept God’s promise for the world.

Rather than reflecting on the whole of your life this week (as Simeon and Anna do), we instead want you to choose one, single story of a significant event in your life.

Even if you have told this story many times before, tell it again. This time, however, talk about how this moment fits within God’s story of love for you and for the world, within the story of your faith. To be sure, this exercise will not come naturally to all!

And perhaps you will find that there is no “easy” way to fit God’s story together with yours in this instance. In faith, however, we confess that God was indeed present in that time, God is still present now as you retell it, and God will continue being present in your story always!

We also invite you this week to have the courage and grace to bear witness to someone else's story. Listen carefully to the story of another person in your group, pray with them, and see if together this time of sacred storytelling helps you to see God's story at work in your life more clearly.

May this be a time of grace in Jesus' name.

LUKE 2:25-38

Simeon and Anna Meet the Baby Jesus

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.



From *Claiming Your Place at the Fire*

Richard Leider

Writer Richard Leider is another who wants us to reclaim the power of storytelling and its way of making meaning in our lives. When we tell our stories, something happens. Leider believes it helps us “to better understand ourselves, and enables us to more effectively connect with others in the world.” He believes that any story—from the most dramatic to the most mundane—can forge this sense of connection. As you prepare to share one of your stories with a partner this week, think about how the story you will tell connects you more deeply to yourself, to your neighbor, and to God.

It is never too late to begin to know oneself for the first time. The extent of our earlier inability or refusal to honor our stories will determine how long it will take to recover the life lost in living.

With this understanding comes an opportunity to draw and communicate great wisdom from the life we have led, through the recollection and retelling of our life's stories. Of course, many people are reluctant to share those stories. Usually, this is because they feel there isn't much to tell or because they fear revealing secrets. Yet, it is commonplace that from the most ordinary lives often come some of the most extraordinary tales.

Recalling our stories moves us forward and frees us from the wounds of the past by helping us to put our lives in context. Taking stock of the first half of life is a step toward being freer to live the second half with greater vitality. The events of the first half forced us to pay attention to the “doing” of them; we spent more time making things than making sense of them. But there is something about systematically recalling our stories that accelerates the growth process and puts us in a more solid position to move forward creatively.

As we tell our own stories, a new relationship with the world emerges. We move from an emphasis on external matters to a focus on inward feelings, replacing a feeling of outward obligation with a renewed sense of personal purpose. The inward look transforms the outward journey.

Paradoxically, by becoming better acquainted with our own story, we more fully understand the stories of others. We are freed from the perspective of seeing all reality as revolving around ourselves. We continue to be important, but what's around us—individuals, society, all of nature—takes on new significance. We often move from an egocentric view of reality to one that is more universal.

Increased attention to one's own story carries with it a deeper appreciation for the stories of others. Recalling and affirming our own story frees us from the wounds and despair so evident in many older people. Recalling our own story uncovers feelings of kinship with people with whom we have shared times and places. Doing so enables us to rediscover and respect a new and potentially more purposeful way of relating to the world—both within and around us.

Each of us is born into a particular family at a particular time and place. These historical circumstances are as important as our genetic makeup. Unique advantages or disadvantages, challenges or privileges, opportunities or handicaps are inescapable ingredients of our own story. Neither are we born into, nor do we live our lives, in a vacuum. The combined consequences of the period and place into which we are born define us as surely as does our DNA.

And so, it becomes clear that from the beginning, we are not self-made. Others have provided for our well-being (or not) in a host of ways. And it is not just our parents or guardians who have done so. Unknown strangers who planted trees whose shade we enjoy, forgotten architects of the buildings we work or learn in, anonymous inventors of gadgets that make our lives easier—all these and more are the characters between the lines of our own story. And so, in recalling our story, we inevitably recall the stories of others.

The value of recalling our stories is twofold: Doing so enables us to better understand ourselves, and it enables us to more effectively connect with others in the world.



Hearthcakes

Anne Lamott

Anne Lamott's writing routinely ventures into storytelling that reveals her own struggle to know God more fully alive in her life. In this story, Lamott recalls a frightening few days when she feared her son may have cancer. Her writing is both funny and heartfelt; it is carefully composed and constructed. Do not be intimidated by it as you prepare to share one of your stories to a partner this week! Written memoir is a different practice from the oral storytelling we do in trusting relationships.

However, Lamott's storytelling here does model a larger point well: in her struggle to understand her own suffering and doubt, Lamott finds great comfort in relating her story to God's story. Not only does she identify with the story of Elijah, but she is honest about her relationship to God throughout this experience. As you retell an important story from your life, consider these questions, as Lamott does: How does your story fit into God's larger story? Where did you experience God's presence (or absence) in your story?

Some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom.

I started to think this exactly a year ago when a doctor substituting for Sam's regular pediatrician ran some routine blood tests on him because she suspected he was harboring a parasitic memento of a trip to Mexico. He was in fact treated for parasites, but two weeks later when they tested his blood again, there was still something wrong. By then he had had blood drawn half a dozen times, and was so panic-stricken each time that he had to be held down by a monolithic man named Ira. Ira would be summoned from the back room, and basically he'd sit on Sam while the lab technician drew blood. It was awful. But it was a Parisian holiday compared with the next phone call from the doctor, when she said, "We've ruled out almost everything obvious. I'm afraid I went ahead and sent his blood work to the head of oncology in San Francisco. And the oncologist wants to see you Monday." I felt the top of my head detach, lift up, and blow away like a painter's paper cap.

"Oh," I whispered into the phone...

I called all our best friends, and everyone immediately started listing all the things it could be, besides the bad thing. This was the battle cry—that it could be any number of innocuous things—but I have been through a lot of cancer with a lot of people, and I'm definitely nobody's fool.

So everyone, including Sam's real doctor—who was out of town but who spoke to me by phone—and my doctor friends, all said I needed to stay as calm as possible because it was going to turn out to be OK. My priest friend reminded me that sometimes you get to see just how little you're actually in charge of. I told him I was never going to call him again.

I started to cry, and I cried off and on all day. I picked Sam up from school and made some lame excuse for my tears, and I offered him any toy he wanted in exchange for him giving a little more blood. We went to the lab and they summoned Ira, who lumbered out and sat on Sam while blood was drawn. When they were done, I took Sam off to the bathroom with me because I had to pee and that was when I first discovered that God is in the ladies' room...

I sat on the toilet and closed my eyes. It was incredibly quiet. Then Sam began to fill up urine specimen cups with tap water and to do various pouring experiments with them—pouring water from cup to cup when the brims were touching, pouring from one cup to another from many inches away, covering the mouth of one cup with another and trying to transfer the water without spilling any—or, the second time, without spilling so much.

For our various friends whose children have gotten sick, the nightmare always began with blood that was *sanpakku*. These friends also insisted that Sam's funky blood could be so many other things even though in their cases, the bad blood hadn't turned out to be any of the other things, the better things. The bad blood had turned out to be cancer, cystic fibrosis, brain damage, a heart that wasn't growing and was never going to grow.

Mostly these friends were atheists, so you couldn't fob off some easy hope on them when the nightmare struck; they had no truck with grace lite. You couldn't distract and encourage them with nice Christian ideas about heaven or with what our Eastern friends believe, that death is—as Ram Dass put it—a little like selling the old Ford. As I've said before, I believe that when all is said and done, all you can do is to show up for someone in crisis, which seems so inadequate. But then when you do, it can radically change everything. Your there-ness, your stepping into a scared parent's line of vision, can be life-giving, because often everyone else is in hiding—especially, in the beginning, the parents. So you come to keep them company when it feels like the whole world is falling apart, and your being there says that just for this moment, this one tiny piece of the world is OK, or is at least better.

So in the women's bathroom at the blood lab, watching Sam contentedly do his pouring experiments with urine specimen cups, I decided I would simply show up and be as sane as I could, as faithful and grown-up. This decision helped me to back out of the

tunnel of fear. I looked in the mirror at my worried face, but instead of fixating on the crow's feet, the brand new Harry Dean Stanton crease in the hollow of my cheek, I prayed. I asked for faith in God's will, for faith in God's love and protection. I prayed for my sense of humor to survive. I prayed for guidance, and, studying my scared- mother face in the mirror, I suddenly got my answer: Go forth, I heard, and shop.

So we went to our favorite cheesy toy store at the mall. I had, after all, promised Sam a toy. We went to the store, and he bought a plastic toy that changed from a race car to an armed replicant if you knew how to pull hidden limbs out from underneath the chassis, the tail from the trunk, and snap the menacing head out from beneath the hood of the car.

There in the toy store, watching him tear off the plastic packaging, my mind raced with images of him pale and quiet and weak, and before I knew it, I had taken him by the hand and headed back to the women's bathroom.

We went into a stall and I sat on the toilet and he began to play with his toy, which was in its replicant stage. I closed my eyes and prayed beggy prayers. I suggested all sorts of really awful people he or she should go after instead of my boy, people of dubious political responsibility.

Sam was making quiet replicant noises, windy and metallic like a breeze passing through rusty machine parts. He seemed entirely happy, whereas I felt like I was facing execution. An ache of homesickness came over me, for our old life before Sam's blood got funky, for the sweet functional surface of that life, for all the stuff and routine that hold me together, or at least that I believe holds me together. That's the place I like to think of as reality. Maybe it's full of lusts and hormones and yearnings for more, more, more, and maybe it is all about clutching and holding and tightness, but I just love it to pieces and it was where I wanted to be.

Instead everything felt so ominous, dark and frightening, as if we were hiding from someone in a cave. I suddenly remembered the cave where the prophet Elijah hung out while waiting to either be killed by Ahab or saved by God. An angel had come to him earlier as he sat in the desert under a broom tree, and the angel had given him a message. First the angel told him he should eat. I love this. This is one of my favorite moments in the Bible, God as Jewish mother: Elijah, eat something! The angel said he should eat, and then rest, and then retire to the cave and wait for further instructions. The angel promised that the Lord would be passing by there soon.

So this is what Elijah did. He ate hearthcakes and drank a jug of water and then went to wait in the cave for the word of the Lord. First he heard a howling gale, but he didn't go to the mouth of the cave because he knew that such loudness wasn't God, "and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him." The voice told him God's will for him, what he must do to save himself and God's people, and this of course is exactly what Elijah proceeded to do.

Sam wanted to leave, but I felt safe in the cave with God and Sam. Still, after a while I got up and took Sam's hand and we went and got some smoothies. You really do have to eat, anything at all you can bear. So we had smoothies, with bananas, which I believe to be the only known cure for existential dread. Then we got in our car to go home. I spent the next two days taking care of us. We ate a lot of muffins in lieu of hearthcakes, and drank a lot of water. I went into the bathroom a lot to pray for patience. People came by, and sometimes they sat with me on the floor of my bathroom. It would be so great if we could go in and out of this place without drugs or Ahab on our trail. But mostly it seems like we can't do it when we have our act together, because we can't do it when we're acting.

I also remembered that sometimes when you need to feel the all-embracing nature of God, paradoxically you need to hang out in ordinariness, in daily ritual and comfort. What is the old song? "Same old, same old pair of slippers, same old, same old bowl of rice, same old, same old glimpse of paradise." I washed the windows so we could see the trees more clearly, I gave the dog a flea bath, I lay on the floor and drew with Sam. It took such great muscular effort to appear unruffled, to hide my fear about his health, that I thought I might get a charley horse. I was faking it, not quite making it, but not going under either.

And soon my prayers were answered, first when patience miraculously descended like soft, chick-yellow parachute silk. Before, I had been fretting and pacing while waiting to hear from the doctor. But patience is when God—or something—makes the now a little roomier. Looking at the one beam of sunlight streaming into the living room, casting warm light on our pets, two plants, one old friend and a small boy drawing on the floor, I finally realized I was more or less OK for the time being—and this was an amazing difference.

And then two days later the doctor called with the great good news that she'd canceled our appointment with the oncologist in San Francisco. Yes, Sam had to go back for

more blood work—had to be sat upon one more time by Ira—but she no longer believed that he was in any serious trouble. He was eventually diagnosed with a really uninteresting allergy.

God: I wish you could have some permanence, a guarantee or two, the unconditional love we all long for. “It would be such skin off your nose?” I demand of God. I never get an answer. But in the meantime I have learned that most of the time, all you have is the moment, and the imperfect love of people.

I called my priest friend and told him our good news. He groaned with relief. “Oh, honey,” he said. Both of us were silent for a while. Then he said, “Baby? Sometimes deliverance is as cool as the air in a redwood grove.”

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TELLING YOUR STORY

For this final small group session, we invite you to share a longer, personal story (see questions below). This can be done with the partner you've been with the past weeks or with a different person/s in your group. Because this may be a longer conversation, we suggest you do this in twosomes or threesomes. As one person speaks, it might be helpful for another person to be the "interviewer," asking the questions below or other follow-up questions. When you are the interviewer/listener, make sure you don't insert your own thoughts or experiences. Your job is to truly hear another's story, and then when it's your turn, to be heard. The hope is to help you take one story from your life (ordinary, joyful, difficult) and help you reflect on it and see it in light of God's grace and as a part of God's story. Take about 15-20 minutes for each person.

As you consider which significant story to share in your small group this week, below are some questions that may help to get you started. You may use the 'notes' area on the following page to outline your story.

1. Share a time when your life went down a different path than you were previously on (a time of transition). How old were you? What did life look like previous to the change in path? How did you end up going down that path?
2. What effect did it have on your life at the time? Has that transition affected who you are today? If yes, how?
3. How do you imagine life would have been different without that transition?
4. What role (if any) did your faith play during this time?
5. Looking back, what does it reveal to you about God and God's promises for you?
6. How has such an experience led you to live differently in relationship to your neighbor and God's creation?
7. What wisdom would you share with someone going through a similar experience?
8. Is there anything left unresolved from this experience that needs continued attention and prayer?

CLOSING

After your stories have been shared, please come back together as a large group. Go around your circle and have each person share a sentence on what has been most meaningful, challenging, interesting or delightful for you from these past 5 weeks together. Close by praying together the Prayer of Good Courage.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The paper itself is a clean, off-white color.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We hope this has been a meaningful 5 week journey for you...but it doesn't end here! There are a few next steps that we want you to know about:

A new kind of Christmas letter. Many people are writing letters over the next few weeks to include in a Christmas card. You will receive some that are long lists of accomplishments, tales of wonderful travels, and updates on family members; and it's always a delight to stay in touch with these folks, near and far. BUT...what if your Christmas letter this year (whether you send it out or not!) was an exercise in story-telling? What if, during this season where we celebrate God incarnate, made into human flesh, we told a brief story of how we have seen or experienced God "made real" in our lives and in our world over the past year? What if our Christmas letter became a witness to God's presence and light in our lives...which is truly the message of Christmas? And what if we shared these letters/stories with others at Peace?

