<Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; Matthew 23:1-12>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

There is something holy that I love about funerals. I think I’ve commented on this before, but there is indeed something that fills my heart when it comes to funerals. And yes, the grief is present and real and that breaks my heart. Bearing witness, honest witness, to grief and sorrow in a time of loss is and always will be heart-breaking. But two seemingly-opposite things can, in fact, be true at the same time. Because even in the midst of grief and sorrow and heartache, something holy and heart-filling also takes place, and that is when the people gathered begin telling stories. And not just any stories, but the deep stories of family history which have shaped the members of the family and those who share their love. At some point in the gathering, usually after the service but not exclusively, the stories of the family and the beloved one whose loss is grieved start to dominate the conversation in the best way, and that moment is holy to behold.

These are not just any stories, either. These are the best of the stories. They are the ones which form the foundation of family identity, connecting the known and remembered past to a future which, in such a moment, seems a bit more uncertain than usual. For any of us who have lived through such an experience of story-telling on such an occasion, we do not need to stretch our imagination to grasp the truth of this. Funeral stories are holy stories, and they ground us in our faith.

The truth of this is not just known by us, but validated from our reading this morning from Joshua. Because the people of God, who have traveled for generations, now, through the wilderness are in a similar position. Granted, our reading this morning does not pick up exactly where we left off last week, but the events follow one from the other. Moses has died, and been buried in the fullness of love by the God who had called and led him, even as he led the people. And now the people, under the new leadership of Joshua of Nun, continue forward in grief.

I can only imagine how this transition has felt for Joshua, following in the spiritual footsteps of Moses and all that Moses represented to the people. And if that were not enough, it is a momentous time in the life of the people of God, as well, for they stand on the edge of the land that has been promised, and they are set to move away from being a people who wandered in the wilderness to being a people who entered into the land.

In the midst of it all, Joshua and the people find themselves grounded in the story of their faith, the story of God’s presence and promise, of God’s leadership and deliverance. But it is no mere story that is told placidly around the campfires or even in the assembly. Rather, it is a story which is lived out in the very actions of Joshua and the people.

There are a number of similarities between these first chapters of the Book of Joshua and Moses leading the people out of slavery in Egypt. In the preceding chapter, we hear how Rahab housed two spies from Joshua’s camp and, in return, received the promise that her household would be spared. And what would be the sign to spare that one particular household when the people of God entered into Jericho? She was to leave a scarlet rope hanging from the top window of her household; just as the households of the people were marked with red on the occasion of the Passover and they were spared, Rahab’s household would be spared by a red marking, as well.

And then, when we come to actual crossing of the Jordan River, the people are led by the presence of God, not as a pillar of cloud and fire this time but by the Ark of the Covenant. As the priests carrying the Ark step into the waters of the Jordan, the river is “stood in a heap” upstream, allowing the people to cross the boundary from their old life into the new on dry ground. The story of people now about to move - literally - into the next, new stage of their living echoes and parallels the story of their ancestors as they, themselves, moved into the next, new stage of their living, coming out of slavery in Egypt.

Friends, this no accident, and it is not mere coincidence, either. Rather, this is the deliberate action of God to both comfort and establish the new leadership. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this parallel is God providing comfort and, while establishing Joshua, reminding all the people - including Joshua - that it is God who has led *and* continues to lead them.

The paralleling of the story creates a shared common memory as God establishes and connects Joshua to Moses, and lifts up the continuation of the promise & presence to lead the people. Remember, it was not Moses, alone, who led the people out of slavery and through the wilderness. Rather, it was God, through Moses, who led the people. The same will now be true for Joshua. And in the shared common story which we hold to, as well, the same is still true today for any leader in faith, and for any people who seek to follow.

What is the story that we are tied to, which makes up our shared common memory, as we seek to live as Christ’s disciples and follow God in faith today? Is a story of scarcity or abundance? A story of mistakes or a story of grace? Is it a story of human leadership or of God’s?

Jesus has some poignant words of caution for the disciples, but also for the religious leaders of the day. Why? Because the leaders had drifted too far into an incorrect story, believing that the leadership of the people was theirs, and of their own capability.

And this not an uncommon mistake, I’m sorry to say. It happens to all of us, and has certainly happened to me. To my colleagues. To others on whom the spotlight has shone. We don’t need to beat ourselves up over this, it is enough to acknowledge that it happens and then strive to re-calibrate appropriately. It’s why we have, each week, a

time of Confession that is tied directly to a time of assurance of forgiveness. It is part of our nature to step errantly, and it is a part of God’s nature to forgive and redirect.

But the story is never about me; at least, it shouldn’t be. Any story I tell as one who stands in front of you and tells stories should never be about my accolades or accomplishments, nor is it about my missteps or mistakes. Any story I tell should have one and only one focus: the presence and leadership of God. This is true for me. This is true for you. This is true for all of us who follow and proclaim the God who is present and active within our world.

The truest story has never been about us; it has always been about God. That is why Jesus’ words in warning to the disciples, and in condemnation of the Pharisees, can become so uncomfortable to hear: they remind us just how easy it can be to make the story about ourselves more than it is about God. In love and grace, we are reminded of the story which is at the heart of all our other stories in this world, and we are drawn back to the source.

On this All Saints’ Day, as we remember those who have told and lived the story of faith in our lives, and in our community, we remember as well the source of our story. We remember as we gather together, as we seek to worship as the body of Christ in the world. We remember that it is God who leads us, and does not forsake us. That no matter what we may face, what grief we might bear or what joy we might celebrate, that God leads us to and through it, onward to the vision of God’s Kingdom present within the world. Just as it was God who lifted up and established Moses, God lifted up and established Joshua. Not for their sake, but to lead the people through them. God continues to raise up, and more than that, God continues to lead. And in this, we give thanks. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)