

## **OUR STORY**

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Texts: Psalm 78:1-8 and Ephesians 3:14-21

When a couple asks me to officiate at their wedding I require that they participate in premarital counseling, most often with me. One session of that premarital counseling is devoted to something called a genogram which I have mentioned to you before. A genogram is like a family tree on steroids. Each spouse-to-be sketches out the lines of his or her family tree from grandparents or great-grandparents down to the current generation; some draw it in pencil on the back of an envelope while others create works of art in color, some even with pictures! Each spouse-to-be is asked to consider who in that family tree has been the biggest influence in his or her life and to identify any patterns in the family tree. For instance, in one family three generations of men had died of heart attacks in their early-fifties. In another, everyone in the family lived within five miles of one another. In yet another, the bride-to-be recognized that her mother, aunt, grandmother and great-grandmother were all strong, dominant women married to quiet, submissive men – that proved to be a real “aha” moment for the groom-to-be! In all those family trees there are some saints who have provided shining examples of good marriages and faithful living, and some rogues who have gone their own way, leaving a trail of disasters in their wake. I wonder what your genogram might look like and where you fit in.

Psalm 78 serves as a kind of poetic genogram for the people of Israel in King David’s day. It traces the story of God’s people from deliverance from bondage in Egypt through their wilderness wanderings to settlement in the Promised Land. Along the way there are memorable moments:

the plagues that convinced Pharaoh to let God’s people go,

the parting of the Red Sea to deliver the people from Pharaoh’s  
army,

the miraculous flow of water from the rock at Meribah to quench the  
people’s thirst,

the equally miraculous provision of manna and quail to feed the hungry people in the desert,  
the anointing of David, the young shepherd boy, as king.

Those events sketched out the roots and branches of the tree of that family of faith of which we too are a part. But the psalmist is not content to just trace the family lines. He recounts the stories that give shape to the tree, including patterns repeated again and again and again along the way.

The dominant pattern which he identifies is a pattern that might be pretty familiar to us, not only from our study of Scripture, but also from the reality of our lives. It is the story of people who are blessed by God and respond with repeated acts of disobedience, rebellion and unfaithfulness. Suffering sometimes follows, yet God still responds with blessings. The key word in the story which links the blessings and the behavior is: YET...!

- God makes streams of water come out of the rock, "YET," says the psalmist, "the people sinned still more against God."
- God was angry because the people had no faith in God, "YET," says the psalmist, "God rained down on them manna to eat."
- The people's hearts were not steadfast toward God, nor were they true to God's covenant, "YET," says the psalmist, "God forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them."
- God led the people to safety and settled them in a new land, "YET," says the psalmist, "they tested the Most High God and rebelled against him and did not observe his decrees."

The YET of the people is the result of short memories, wandering eyes, and impatient spirits that entice them to move away from God and into sin. The YET of God is the patient persistence of divine forgiveness and unmerited blessing. Across the generations this pattern: *blessing – sin – suffering – redemption* is repeated in the story of God's people. It is as if the people never learn from their mistakes, but are bound to repeat them – as we do! Sin persists; only the form of sin changes – from chronic whining to blatant disobedience and faithless idolatry. The people sin, YET God remains faithful. That is the common thread that runs through our story of faith. How does the psalmist explain this patient, loving action of God when God's people keep going astray? "God remembered that they were but flesh," he says, "a wind that passes and does not come again."

That remembrance is grace. That divine YET is grace. The arc of grace extended by God to our ancestors and to us is vast. It is grace that is wide enough to encompass our worst moments and most egregious acts, grace that embraces us in love when we are pretty much unlovable. The psalmist tells that grace-filled story to reassure God's people of the faithfulness of the Lord, faithfulness that endures across the generations. Ann Weems tells of such grace in a story from her own family story:

*It was a family treasure  
that vase  
that golden vase  
the vase that had belonged to my great-grandmother,  
to my grandmother, and now to my mother...*

*And the vase sat on the mantle  
out of reach of little fingers.*

*However, I managed to reach it*

*I climbed to reach it  
I broke it  
the family treasure.*

*Golden pieces of once a family treasure  
valueless  
that moments before was priceless.*

*And I began to cry  
then louder  
in sobs that brought my mother running.*

*I could hardly get it out: I broke the vase...the treasure.*

*And then my mother gave to me a gift:*

*A look of relief over her face and  
"Oh, I thought you had been hurt!"*

*And then she hugged to her the one  
who had just moments before broken the family treasure.*

*She gave to me a gift:*

*She made it very clear that I was the family treasure.*

*I was what was priceless and of great value.*

*She also made it very clear where her heart was.*

The psalmist wants us to know where God's heart is. It is with us, filled with love for us who are the treasured creations of God's hand, filled

with grace that perseveres with us even when we fail to persevere with God. That is our story, the story told by our ancestors that has shaped our lives and hopes and dreams as the people of God, a story that continues in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And all that is good news, YET...

That good news is just one generation from extinction if we do not share it. The psalmist tells this story to kindle love for God in future generations, to reassure them of God's unending love and persistent grace, and to encourage them to learn from the mistakes of the past in order that they might not repeat those sins in the present and future. The psalmist tells the unvarnished truth, not only of the saints in the family tree, but also of the rogues who rebelled against God and forgot God and went astray – *a stubborn and rebellious generation whose heart was not steadfast and whose spirit was not faithful to God*. The story is told to new generations in the hope that they might be different, might be more faithful and obedient, might set their hope in God and not forget all that God had done.

That is why our parents, grandparents and ancestors in faith have continued to tell the story – so that we might believe the good news, live more faithfully, and hold onto a more hopeful future. Few of us come to faith by some direct divine revelation as Paul did; we believe because we have heard the story of faith from others and seen it enacted in the lives of women, men, and children who have touched our lives and inspired us to believe. God's story is told by *human* voices, with *human* hands and *human* faces that we know or come to know. Who was it in that genogram of faith who sparked faith in you? Who nurtured it to the point that you have come here this morning to sing your praise and to hear a word from God that you dare to believe is true? God's story is entrusted by God to humans, and this day, it is entrusted to us in this generation to nurture faith in the next generation. We are called to continue that tradition of telling the story of our faith so that future generations may learn from our mistakes and embrace a more faithful path, trusting in an-ever present God who regards each and every person as a precious treasure and much-loved child.

What then are you doing to share God's story with the next generation? What are you telling your children and grandchildren and neighbor's children about what God has done and is doing for you and for

them? If we do not share our story, if we do not tell the next generations about the good news we believe to be true, then that good news will die with us. Does that matter to you? For if it does, then speak up! Share the good news! Tell the story! With your voice, with your hands, with your life – tell the story! Add to it yet another chapter for another generation! For, if we believe the good news of Jesus and God’s love for the world to be true and life-altering and vital to a joyful, hope-filled, purposeful life and a comfort in death, then we can be silent no longer! Tell the story as the psalmist and prophets did, as Jesus and Paul did, as Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. did, as Bob Wetzell and John Mitchell and Pat Menk and Yulee Lerner and Grif Bonham and Mack Swift and John Zinn and Wayne Davis did, as my parents and maybe your parents too did. Tell the story to this generation and to the next and to the next and to the next, for it is a great story to tell and an even greater story in which to live!

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus – to all generations, forever and ever! Amen*