



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Your Story, God's Glory

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ APRIL 6, 2025

Selections from Psalm 107

Verses 1-2

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble.

Verses 4-9

⁴Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to a city to dwell in;

⁵hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

⁶Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

⁷He led them by a straight way
till they reached a city to dwell in.

⁸Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!

⁹For he satisfies the longing soul,
and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

Verses 10-11; 13-15

- ¹⁰ Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
prisoners in affliction and in irons,
¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.
¹² So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor;
they fell down, with none to help.
¹³ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
¹⁴ He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and burst their bonds apart.
¹⁵ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!

Verses 17-22

- ¹⁷ Some were fools through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities suffered affliction;
¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
²⁰ He sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from their destruction.
²¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!
²² And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!

Verses 23-25; 28-29; 31-32

- ²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the great waters;
- ²⁴ they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
- ²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
- ²⁸ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
- ²⁹ He made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
- ³¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!
- ³² Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Verses 33; 35; 43

- ³³ He turns rivers into a desert,
springs of water into thirsty ground,
- ³⁵ He turns a desert into pools of water,
a parched land into springs of water.
- ⁴³ Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things;
let them consider the steadfast love of the LORD.

When I was five years old, my grandparents came to visit from out of state. It was a beautiful New England summer day with a bright blue sky, so my family decided to go to the local air show.

It was the first one I'd ever been to because it was the first time I wore earplugs – I can remember rolling the squishy foam and stuffing it into my ear. I was particularly interested in the Blue Angels, a special performance by military jets, which was a highlight of the show. At one point, my grandparents took my little sister and me on a walk to get some food. While we were walking back, munching on fried dough, my grandparents pointed as the Angels soared overhead. I stared, watching them fly so close together I couldn't imagine how the wings didn't clip each other. I watched for a while, then I looked back in front of me, and my grandparents were gone. They had kept walking with my little sister, not realizing I was still staring at the sky. I was lost.

I started wandering through the crowd, starting to cry as I bumped into strangers, trying to go the direction I thought my family might be. Then, miraculously, just when all hope seemed lost, I ran headlong into Mrs. Fairbairn, a lady from our church who happened to be at the air show. Thankfully, I'd memorized Dad's cell phone number: 258-6182. Soon, Mrs. Fairbairn reunited with my family. This story taught me the feeling of being lost and being found. In the words of our Psalm – to be delivered from my distress. Because I lived through that story, I'll never forget that feeling. And now, neither will you, because I have just hijacked your brain in such a way that you won't be able to forget my point. I told you a story.

In a TED Talk, Sarah Jane Murray talks about the brain science of storytelling. When we tell stories or hear stories, our brains light up. Neuroactivity in the brain increases fivefold when we hear a story. Murray says this is because in a well-told story, different centers in our brain get engaged. When you're just listening to a presentation, only the language center of your brain lights up. That's why your statistics professor's dry lectures did not always capture your attention. But when I told you about the squishy foam earplug, the part of your brain that processes touch lit up. When I

told you about the blue sky and the Blue Angels, your color center lit up. When I told you about the feeling of a five-year-old realizing his grandparents were gone in a big crowd, your brain released cortisol – the stress chemical – as if you were living the stressful event with me. When I found Mrs. Fairbairn, your brain released oxytocin – that’s the feel-good chemical that creates empathy and bonding.

According to Murray, you are 22 times more likely to remember a story than a fact alone. That’s why she started her presentation with a story, so I stole her idea and did the same thing. Human brains are wired for stories. And I don’t think that’s a biological coincidence – I think God did that on purpose.

Our Scripture this morning was a story. Rather, it was four stories – which is why you heard four readers. Psalms, you might know, were the hymnbooks of ancient Israel. Certain commentators think this was the type of Psalm that would be sung at a major festival, in front of the whole community, at the temple. So, what is the truth the singers of Psalm 107 were sharing? Our main idea today is this: **You were made to tell your story for God’s glory.** We are going to break that down three ways: first, *who* tells stories? Second, *how* should we tell stories? Third, *why* do we tell stories?

Let us start with the first idea. *Who tells stories?* The first two verses of Psalm 107 tell us: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His steadfast love endures forever!” (verse 1) The word for “giving thanks” is an imperative. It’s a command, not a suggestion. The next verse tells us who this command is for: “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,” he declares in verse two. In ancient Israel, if you fell on hardship, you might sell yourself into slavery if you could no longer afford a home. But the nearest of kin to you would have the moral duty to “redeem” you – essentially, to buy you back. This person was the “kinsman redeemer.” Famously, the book of Ruth tells of a widow and her mother-in-law trying to make ends meet. A man named Boaz, a family relation to Ruth’s mother, Naomi, becomes the “kinsman redeemer”. He “buys back” the land Naomi’s husband owned and marries and “redeems” Ruth.

To redeem was to pay a price. It was to buy someone back, to deliver them from distress.

This word “redemption” carries over to the New Testament, when we learn that *anyone who believes in Jesus has been redeemed*. Paul tells us in Galatians 3:13 that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Jesus’ death on the cross was to “redeem” us – to “buy us back,” to pay the price for our sin, by taking that price onto himself. C.S. Lewis depicts this with the story of Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia* – after the young boy Edmund commits treason and is sentenced to death, Aslan the Lion gives himself up to die in Edmund’s place. All of us have been redeemed. Psalm 107:2 informs us who tells the stories: “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” That means you.

In this Psalm, you heard four different stories. Was there one that resonated with you more than the others? Perhaps you know what it’s like to be the first story: someone wandering in a wilderness, unable to find your way forward. That describes how you felt after losing a job, going through unexpected grief, or getting rejected from your dream college. Or you resonated with the second story – someone who had rebelled against God’s commands and was imprisoned or in chains. The feeling of being trapped by a bad habit or a bad choice. Or the last story – the ship being tossed on the storm in the sea – maybe that’s you right now, after a recent health diagnosis or a breakup. In each of these stories, different though they are, the person in distress experiences God’s deliverance. In fact, maybe you found your way to our church because someone told you a story of how they experienced God’s hand in their life, and you thought, *I want that too*. The number one reason that people end up attending a church is not because of a great pastor or great music. It’s because someone they personally know invited them. All of us relate to different stories, which is why all of us are invited to share stories. The final verse of the last picture highlights this: verse thirty two commands, “Let them extol God in the congregation of the people.”

You weren't meant to keep your story to yourself. You were meant to share it. You have a story to share for God's glory.

That may be a scary thought! Maybe you don't feel your story is that impressive. Maybe you're not a natural storyteller. We all know what it's like to be stuck in a conversation with a long-winded, repetitive storyteller! For others of us, our mental image of telling a story is fire-and-brimstone evangelism with a megaphone on a ladder in downtown Fort Myers. Is there another way? Let's look at the next idea: **how to tell stories.**

If you paid close attention to these four narratives, you saw a pattern. First, there's distress: Some wandered in desert wastes (4), Some sat in darkness and the shadow of death (10), Some were fools through their sinful ways (17), some went down to the sea in ships (23) where they experienced a storm. Then, they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress (6, 13, 19, 28). That same exact verse, four times. Then, the redeemed are invited to respond: to thank the Lord for his steadfast love (8, 15), to tell of his deeds in songs of joy (22), to praise him in the assembly of the elders (32). Do you see the pattern?

Distress – redemption – response.

When I was doing mission work in Dubai, my mentor trained us to tell our stories in three minutes. The first minute: what was my life like before I met Jesus? The second minute: how did I come to be in a relationship with Jesus? The third: how has my life been different since I met Jesus? For those of us who grew up in the church, that phrasing might be changed to "When did my relationship with Jesus become more personal?" We practiced that over and over for two reasons. First, it helped us learn our stories. Being forced to distill something to its essence is really useful. When I was in college, there were a group of us who preached in our campus chapel regularly. When it was time for one of our sermons, we'd make each other do two things. First, give us your sermon in two minutes. Second, give us your sermon in one sentence. If we couldn't

distill it down to two minutes or one sentence, we weren't ready yet – we didn't really know it. The one sentence, to be fair, usually had a semicolon.

The other helpful thing about the three-minute exercise was it made us focus on this question: *who is the hero of your story?* This three-minute exercise formed that answer: “Before I met Jesus; how I met Jesus; after I met Jesus.” Telling our stories this way formed us to believe that we were different because of Jesus Christ and his work in our lives. He is the one who led us out of the desert, who broke our bonds in prison, who calmed the storm at sea. When you tell the story of your life, who is the hero of your story? Is it God who delivered you? Or is it all your hard work? In the Old Testament, if you became prosperous enough, you *could* redeem yourself. But the debt of sin that we've accrued against God is one we can't erase no matter how rich in good deeds we are. We're told in Colossians 2:14 that God “canceled the record of debt that stood against us...nailing it to the cross.” Jesus' redemption is a price we couldn't pay. If he's not the hero of your story, and if you think you could get where you are without him, you're telling the wrong story, or you're telling the story wrong.

It might be your story – but when you tell it, who gets glory? What is different about your life because of Jesus? Who are you telling? And who is the hero of your story? When you tell a story for your glory, you might impress other people. But when you tell a story for God's glory, you give them a chance to reimagine their own story-maybe God can write a new chapter for them, too.

We've talked about the who and the how and now the final point is **why we tell stories** of God's deliverance in our lives. This might be the question you are really wondering. Why can't I just invite them to church, or give them a sermon, or send them a TikTok video? Why do I have to tell my story?

The final verse of the Psalm tells us: “Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord.” This last verse tells us the point of the Psalm. Someone wise will think about these things and consider, or understand, the steadfast love of the Lord. Remember, the love of God was the start of the

Psalm. Hearing stories and telling stories helps us better understand God's love. But the message is deeper than that. The word *consider* is a special, rare tense in the original language, called the *Hithpael* tense. You've heard of active verbs, which is something you do – I gave Pastor Su a high five. And passive verbs – I was given a high five by Pastor Brad. But the *Hithpael* tense is another kind of verb – a *reflexive* verb. It's an action you do to yourself – like "I dress myself." How does that work with "consider?" How can I "consider to myself" the steadfast love of God?

Think of it this way. When my buddy Nick started a car detailing business, he tried an unorthodox strategy. He would give his customers a massive discount in exchange for a Google Review. If you're like me—and I know I am—I make 90% of my decisions based on Google Reviews. When I'm traveling and want to spend the night somewhere or go somewhere to eat, I look up Google reviews to learn what other people say. And if the reviews are compelling enough, I decide that *I will make the same decision myself*. One five-star review isn't enough. Famous people giving a five-star review isn't enough. But thousands of reviews will compel me to change my own behavior: to do an action unto myself, if you will.

Here is what I believe the Psalmist is saying: telling stories as God's people, each one of us in different ways, functions like a plethora of five-star Google reviews. One story is not enough. One pastor is not enough. Telling stories functions as a Google review for the others who are lost in the desert or out at sea. As they hear the chorus not just of a paid pastor, not just of a famous celebrity, but of their golf buddy or school classmate or next door neighbor talking about how God redeemed them from their distress, it might just function as the last light they needed to find their way home. As one of the younger pastors on staff, parents or grandparents sometimes will share with me about their kids and grandkids who might be spiritually seeking. Sometimes, these young people are looking for apologetics – reasons to believe. Sometimes, they want to know what you believe. But most often, these young people are interested in their grandparents' story. Not what you believe, not even why you

believe, but *how you came to believe it*. What happened to you? Why Jesus for you? Knowing and sharing our stories has power.

Our Confirmation students this morning are a fitting example. Most of you became part of this church because someone you know and love invited you. They told you a story of how they were finding love and community through Jesus and his people. Several of you have brought others in, too. You have an impact someone like me never could. If I were to show up at your school and start telling your friends about youth group, it would probably just weird them out. But when you tell them your story, they want to come find what you have. The same is true for all of you here: you have an influence and an impact to make in this world that a 'professional' like me never could. Your story matters. It can change a life – just like someone else's changed yours.

Let me give you two ways to take stories into your day-to-day life. The first is to **hear stories of God's glory**. If you are struggling somewhere along the way in one of these four pictures, directly expose yourself to hearing stories of how God works. Perhaps you decide to pick up Savannah Guthrie's book in our Book Center, one of our books of the year, and listen to the stories of how *Mostly What Gods Does is Love You*. If our brains are wired for stories, hearing stories will help form us. Second, **learn how to tell your story for God's glory**. During a family program we used to run here, we would always have a conversation around dinner with the question: *What was your God sighting this week?* We trained ourselves to expect God, to look for God, and to talk about God. How might you start training yourself to look for God as the hero of your story – sharing it in simple ways as you go from place to place?

To practice what I'm preaching: let me tell you a story. Many of you know that, nine years ago, I dreamed of being a pastor but could not afford seminary. I had hatched a not-so-brilliant plan to move to Seattle and live in someone's basement and work a part-

time internship and just go to school a couple of years later. That's when I got the phone call: a mysterious church that I had never heard of in Bonita Springs, Florida, had created a brand-new scholarship program. It made it possible for me to go to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. My whole plan changed. It was not my idea. It was not my hard work. I felt like God's hand intervened, literally changing my life course from the West Coast to the East Coast.

During my first week at school, in one of my very first classes, we were randomly divided into a small group of guys and invited to share our answers to the question: how did you end up at seminary? I reveled in telling my story, sure I had the best one, the most unique one. Then it got to the last guy in our group. Much of this group of guys were young, fresh out of college. But this guy – this was a dad! He had four kids and a fifth on the way. And this guy spoke up, and said...

Pastor Su, remind me, what was it you said?

Su: *Wow that sounds a lot like my story!* Steve and I don't have much in common except that we both wanted to go to seminary and didn't have the funds to go. My family and I needed to come up with \$22,500!

Then I received a call from a guy named Doug Pratt in Bonita Springs, Florida, offering me a scholarship. I said, "Forgive me for being so forward, but how much is the scholarship?" He responded: "\$22,500".

Steve: As you know, Su and I ended up interning together here in 2018. We became good friends, and great pastors, thanks to that scholarship. But even crazier — we both were invited to join the Pastoral team *here at First Church*, and now nine years later, we stand together.

Su: And now you are confirming my daughter at the church that made it all possible! Just like we planned.

Steve: And this is what it means to tell a story for God's glory. You can't make this stuff up. Without God intervening in our lives through this place, we'd never have had the opportunity to tell this story. A decade ago, you chose to be part of a story for God's glory when you invested in that pastoral fund. That story is still being written because you chose to be part of a story. What stories can you continue to write? What stories can you continue to be a part of? What stories can you continue to tell?

