

## Sunday morning worship

September 13, 2020

### Centering words (from Psalm 118)

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;

God's love endures forever!

Let Israel say, "God's love endures forever!"

Let the house of Aaron say, "God's love endures forever!"

Let those who fear the Lord say, "God's love endures forever!"

You are my God, and I will give you thanks.

You are my God, and I will exalt you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;

God's love endures forever!

### Opening prayer

Your story is one of unending love, O God, and of never-ending mercy for all your creation!

During this time of worship, help us to remember that story, and to rejoice in all that you have done and continue to do for all of us! We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen.

### Scripture reading

Mark 2:1-12

*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like this? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat, and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, take up your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone, and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"*

### Meditation

"The Story Goes on"

Once upon a time, there were three little pigs...

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Little Red Riding Hood...

Once upon a time, there was an enchanted princess who slept in a tower...

Once upon a time.

When we hear someone say, "Once upon a time..." we know that a story is coming; and that story will probably take place in a world that is far different from ours. It might be a world where animals talk, or where a wolf dresses up like Grandma, or where a princess can sleep in enchantment for years and years. And we know that the story will turn out well. The three little pigs will outsmart the big, bad wolf; Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother will be rescued by a brave woodsman; and a handsome prince will awaken the princess with a kiss, and they will live happily ever after. The most popular modern stories end well, too. Frodo Baggins throws the One Ring into the fires of Mt. Doom, saving Middle Earth from destruction; Harry Potter defeats

the dark wizard through the power of sacrificial love; and the lion Aslan makes the whole world right in the end. Maybe we love these stories so much because we hope that, at a deep level, they are true. After all the difficulties, the problems, and the suffering, we want everything to eventually turn out all right.

Today is the day that many churches call Rally Day. They invite all their families to gather again after their summer vacations, and Sunday school begins for another year. Rally Day won't be taking place in many churches today. For some, the reality of the pandemic has meant that they can't physically gather together. Other churches have no families to gather, and children's Sunday school is just a distant memory. Our congregation, sadly, fits into both categories. But I don't want to ignore Rally Day, because it reminds us of the important things that we taught our children in Sunday school, and the things that we leaned ourselves.

What did we learn, back in the days when we went to Sunday school ourselves with well-scrubbed faces, freshly-washed church clothes, and shoes that shined? Why, we learned the stories, of course! We learned stories that we love to this day; and we learned the lessons that those stories taught us! When we learned the story of Noah, we discovered that God cares for the animals just as much as he cares for us human beings. When we learned the story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, we found out that God can do all kinds of wonderful things. When we learned the story of David and Goliath, we realized that big bullies don't always win. And when we learned about Jesus, we found out how much God loves us!

We've known those stories for years, now, and maybe we think of them only as scraps of our childhood. Some of us have put them on the shelf next to "Fun with Dick and Jane" and "The Cat in the Hat." After all, we're older now and we don't need those stories anymore. These days, we talk about adult topics like "the theology of prayer" and "the formation of the canon" and "why bad things happen to good people"; and those are all good things to discuss, but we mustn't forget about the stories, because those stories tell us who we are. Those stories may be from long ago and far away, but we are in them, too. They are *our* stories!

Here, let me show you what I mean. Let's take a close look at the story from Mark that I used as this morning's scripture reading. You probably learned it in Sunday school as an example of Jesus' love and power to heal. It certainly is that! But that story invites us in, and it invites us, too, to learn something about ourselves in the process. Let's look at the characters. We see Jesus, the crowd that has gathered outside the house, the paralyzed man and his friends, and some teachers of the law who were in the crowd. I'll bet that the homeowner was there, too, even though he isn't mentioned. Which one of these people are you today?

- Are you one of the crowd who really wants to hear what Jesus has to say, and is willing to be stand outside the front door in order to hear it? Are you so thirsty to hear the Word of God that you are willing to be inconvenienced so that you can get closer to Jesus?
- Are you one of the friends of the paralyzed man, who care so much for him that they take apart a roof to get him to Jesus? Is there anybody that you love so much that you would dig through a roof to get help for that person?
- Are you the paralyzed man himself, who is amazed to find himself healed? Maybe you have been healed yourself, from a physical or emotional wound that you believed you would carry for the rest of your life. Maybe you didn't even believe that Jesus could help you, until you were amazed to find that the pain from that wound was gone!
- Or maybe you are the homeowner, who is fuming mad at the mess that these people are making. You're concentrating on all the money that you'll need to repair your roof, angry

that your quiet, peaceful life has been disrupted. Lots of people feel that way today. In particular, there are many people who would just as soon that the Black Lives Matter movement would just go away, because it means making changes to the way they live and the beliefs that they hold. Are you one of those people?

- Are you one of the people who looked on, realized what had happened, and praised God, even though they hadn't been healed themselves? Maybe you've never been healed yourself, but you've seen all the people who have been changed through God's grace, and you praise God anyway.
- Or are you one of the teachers of the law who is scandalized by what Jesus says and does? Lots of people are still scandalized by Jesus, you know; because Jesus disregards all kinds of social customs in order to help people, even if we don't think they deserve it. We don't much like it when Jesus turns our world upside down to forgive and heal.

Yes, you're in this story somewhere! You might even be more than one character. That's the power of stories from the Bible: they are mirrors in which we can see ourselves, if we are brave enough to look into them. And every single story in the Bible is like that. We can find ourselves in the story of Joseph, whose brothers hated him because he was daddy's favorite; in the story of Moses, who was called by God to do a job that he thought he couldn't do; in the story of Esther, who left some crucial details out of her resumé when she auditioned to be the queen, and then risked everything to help her people; in the story of Peter, who was full of confidence, sure that he knew it all, only to betray the friend that he loved the most.

And all these wonderful stories are woven together into one great big story – a story that began with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. And just like all good stories, it has a happy ending. In fact, the ending of the story might be the very best thing about it! We can read it in the book of Revelation: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with people! God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away!" (Revelation 21:1-4)* Everything will turn out all right in the end, and we will all live happily ever after!

So, here's the very best story that was ever told! Once upon a time, there was a God who loved his creation so much that he refused to abandon it. That God came to be with his creation in a very special way: in a man named Jesus, who showed everyone what God is like. We are right in the middle of that wonderful story; and it hasn't ended yet. The story is still going strong after all these years! And thanks be to God that it is!

### Pastoral prayer

Gracious God, you created us to be a part of your eternal story, the story that began with the creation of the universe itself. Through your creative Spirit, you inspired people to write and edit stories that showed how you acted in their own lives and in the lives of their ancestors. You inspired many writers and editors, so that the scriptures that we accept as sacred contain a wide variety of stories about you. They witness to the fact that you are powerful, merciful, involved in our lives, present to those who need help, and especially concerned for the poor and the oppressed. Finally, people wrote the story of how you came to us as Jesus, a Galilean peasant

who proclaimed your love for everyone, and who showed your power by rising from the dead after he had been executed by the political establishment of his day.

We are grateful for all those stories; for they show us that you are a God who is loving and gracious, one who cares for our well-being in all circumstances even as we make mistakes over and over again. Help us to read the stories in scripture not as mere children's tales or historical curiosities, but as stories that show where you are working in our lives even now. We are grateful that your story continues, and that we are a part of it. Help us to look at ourselves honestly, and to recognize that, although we are sometimes the heroes of the story, at other times we are the people that we condemn the most readily. Help us to realize that you will be there with us throughout the story; and that someday, you will bring the story to a joyous ending when your kingdom comes in fullness.

Today we pray especially for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones;

for those who are suffering;

for those whose memories are bitter;

for those who look to the future with dread instead of anticipation;

and for those who believe that they have no part to play in your story of salvation.

Hold your presence very close to them, that they might realize how much you love them, no matter what their circumstances might be.

And hold us close, too, so that when we are suffering, or bitter, or in despair, we might hold tightly to the Easter story that gives us the hope that with God, all things are possible.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ who died and rose again; and we join now in the prayer that Jesus himself taught us to pray, saying, *"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever!" Amen.*

Offering      ***Reminder: send your offerings to church!***

#### Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Praise God, all creatures here below.

Praise God above, ye heavenly host.

Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost! Amen.

#### Benediction

Now go forth to love and serve the Lord!

Have courage as you move ahead into the future, knowing that you are a part of God's story of salvation, trusting that God will reveal your part to you, and ready to tell that story to all others that you meet.

And the God who created you,

the Christ who redeemed you,

and the Spirit who reminds you of all God's stories will be with you, today and forever. Amen.