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Text: John 20:24-29
Title: The Call of Stories

Praise the LORD.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD
or fully declare his praise?

Blessed are they who maintain justice,
who constantly do what is right.

Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people,
come to my aid when you save them, that I may enjoy the prosperity of your
chosen ones,
that I may share in the joy of your nation
and join your inheritance in giving praise.

- Psalm 106:1-5

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

-John 20:24-29

He breathed on them. Jesus appears, breathes, sends and commissions. "As the father sent me, so I send you." He appears to his doubting, frightened, confused followers – who are hiding in a locked room. And he gives them the spirit of new life. He walks through walls to show that no human structures, no iron bars, no doors, no prisons can keep out the light of the resurrection. He sends them out into the world with a power to forgive sin, with a power to make peace – and he does it through breath and touch – through spirit and through flesh, and he does it through wounds . . . (paragraph from Sara Miles)

Like the disciples in this story – there are times when we are tempted to live our lives . . . in private – there are times when we would rather keep to ourselves, hiding in locked rooms.

Jesus urges his disciples . . . he urges us! – to participate in the life of community. As your new pastor – I anticipate with great joy the opportunity to share in this ministry with you, the people of this church!

I want to share with you today the joy and excitement that is in my heart as I anticipate become a part of your church family . . . but “words” are not able to describe the depth of my feelings.

I don’t want to be too highfalutin here. According to *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition* highfalutin means: “Pretentious . . . expressed in or marked by the use of high-flown bombastic language . . . pompous. In my first sermon I am tempted to be highfalutin . . . but I will not yield to the temptation.

I am inspired by the way that Jesus taught... he did not teach by sermonizing or through didactic methods so much as he taught in stories and parables.

Stories . . . the truth is that the stories we share with one another . . . to be meaningful . . . to be spiritual . . . do not have to speak of otherworldly experience.

The question I am about to ask you is a very spiritual question . . . and here is that question: What was your favorite dish your mother or father prepared when you were growing up? Tell me a story or two about your favorite food . . . about mealtime when you were growing up . . . and we will grow closer to each other, and together we will draw nearer to God.

Do you remember the time Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead? “Taking the little girl by the hand he said to arise. And immediately the girl got up and walked; for she was twelve years old . . . And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to (and now for one of my favorite verses in scripture . . . Jesus) told them to “give her something to eat.” Mark 5:41-43

I wonder what her parents gave her. I’d like some of my dad’s chicken n’ dumplings today!

As we embark on the adventure of ministry together, I hold a deep desire to listen to your stories. Every story you tell me will be a sacred story. The gospel story will intersect . . . among and between our stories. I’m not talking theory here. As we share our stories with one another we will not only become friends . . . we will grow to be more intimate with God.

As we begin our journey, I want to share with you a story; it is the story about my family, particularly my daughter – Sonja Grace who was born 11 weeks ago today. I am overjoyed that Kim, Sonja – as well as my mom and dad, Cliff and Pam Hayes, are with us today. The story of Sonja Grace is a story which carries with it joy and also, I must admit, some unreconciled grief and sadness. It is a story of resurrection.

Sonja was born at Stanford’s Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital on July 27, 2008 - weighing 7 lbs, 4 ounces. The normal, joyful, and full-term pregnancy took an unexpected and fearful turn during delivery. Sonja suffered a meconium aspiration, which quickly developed into bacterial pneumonia.

The neo-natal intensive care unit team rushed her to their unit — it was only a two minute journey — but she stopped breathing en route. Interventions were quick, yet it took 4 hours to stabilize her condition.

In the first hours of intervention – Sonja was immediately put on an oscillator – giving maximum amounts of oxygen and nitrous oxide, which facilitated her breathing; she received 2 blood transfusions and she was given 3 different antibiotics to fight the infection. The first few days, she had 2 nurses assigned solely to monitor Sonja’s needs, which was wonderful care – and yet, it was a testimony to the immense support that

she needed.

I vividly remember when Dr. Hintz entered our hospital room and said: “We have Sonja stabilized now. We’re going to do the best we can, (but) we cannot make any promises. You are free to go and visit baby Sonja now.” I will never forget - the journey from our hospital room to visit baby Sonja in the NICU. It was not just a walk; it was a pilgrimage. Those walks to the NICU felt like the hardest thing I had ever had to do. Each day we walked, trying not to faint as we hoped that Sonja was surviving... and getting better. People would ask: “So, how are you doing?” to which we would say: “I’m doing okay, so long as our baby is doing okay.” St. Paul was right: “... when one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” (1 Cor. 12:26)

The transition to parenthood had happened and yet, I must admit: I didn’t feel . . . well, I was not clear what I felt . . . I certainly did not feel pious. I didn’t understand why this was happening; in fact, it all seemed like a cruel trick – to spend the past nine months with our child only to have her snatched away right before our eyes...

Sonja Grace was on the edge of life and death for 5 days; they were the longest days of my life. Now – I have a partial understanding of why I have heard it said (that): “It is the worst (most painful) thing to lose a child.”

There is no easy way to understand tragedy or suffering, and the answer is often not for us to know.

I find consolation in William Sloan Coffin’s insight that: “When a person suffers... when someone dies an untimely death, God’s heart is the first of all hearts to break.” (WSC, *Alex’s Death*)

There were moments in the hospital when I could not distill any meaning from what was happening to Sonja. There were moments when grief was heavy; my faith was not . . . unwavering. I prayed: “Merciful God – grant me the gift of faith.” Kim and I petitioned friends, family and churches to pray for Sonja. Many asked: “Jonas – what do you want me to pray?” I said: “I want you to imagine Sonja with clean, healthy lungs – asking God to take the infection away.” My father shared with me the prayer that was on his heart, which was from an old hymn: “Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew...” Dad envisioned God restoring Sonja’s lungs by breathing into her lungs . . . the breath of life.

I did not know whether or not Sonja would live, but there were some things I did know...

Spending time with Sonja and Kim at Stanford Medical Center were the most meaningful, spiritual moments of my life.

I will never forget – the first moments I picked up little Sonja-bear into my arms, I felt an indescribable, all-consuming love – A love for Sonja – A love for Kim... for everyone in the room. I did not think such love was possible. I felt the love both inside of me and outside of me.

I did not know whether or not Sonja would live, yet I clearly heard God say – as clear as any human voice I have ever heard – “Your child, Sonja, is a gift. *I will bless her so that she will be a blessing.*” (Gen. 12:2) And I remembered how it says in 1 Chronicles: *When God grants a blessing, it is an eternal blessing!* (1 Chron. 17:27)

As a declaration of hope and trust – Kim said: “Sonja’s middle name should be grace,” because we knew that God’s grace was the only thing that was going to sustain us. Like the old hymn says: “T’was Grace that brought us safe thus far...and Grace will lead us home.

With each day, Sonja Grace kept getting better and healthier...

Then – I knew that Sonja Grace would live when – one day – Dr. Benitz, the lead doctor, approached the bedside and said: “So, what is it like to be parents?”... “It is pretty transformative!”

The following days – the medical staff said that this was a great ‘save.’ The metaphor is a meaningful one for our baseball-loving family, as we know, in spite of the way stats are kept. It is not just the pitcher that pulls off a ‘save,’ but the entire team.

Dr. Benitz said it: “Jonas and Kim – I am just a conductor for a wonderful team. I know that you had an army of people praying for Sonja. Together we created a symphony of medical care and prayer.”

This story I share with you today – I most certainly understand it differently now than I will next year, and will understand it differently still in future years. My understanding will, most certainly, evolve and shift over time. All of these understandings will have meaning and value and beauty. Yet – the purpose of this story is not to understand the mystery of life; it is simply a testimony to God’s presence in my life.

I do not know why our loved ones fall ill at the pinnacle of life... I do not understand why people suffer... I do not understand why our loved ones die untimely deaths.

And yet – God does not promise to give us understanding at all times. God promises us that he will be present in our lives.

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Each one of us here this morning carries with us . . . sacred stories.

As I am with you we will share our stories with one another . . . stories of healing and death . . . stories of forgiveness and anger. These stories . . . stories that God will bless will draw us closer together as a community of faith . . . and will draw us all closer to God.

Every story you share with me . . . whether about a summer trip, a conversation with a friend, a book you enjoyed, a class that challenged you, a meal that created a memory . . . every story you share with me I shall treasure as a sacred story . . . because it will be sacred.

I will end today where I began. If it weren’t sac religious, I’d jump up and down right here in this pulpit . . . but I am a Presbyterian, and this church is on John Calvin Circle. There, I will simply say . . . Kim, Sonja, and I are happy to be here, and we look forward to serving Jesus Christ together with you.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.