

LIVING A STORY OF BLESSING AND HOPE

You may have heard the expression: “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” The same thing is true of the Presbyterian Women’s Retreat – the things that happened on Thetis Island, for the most part, stay on Thetis Island! If you have questions about the photos being shared you need to plan to attend next year.

Some things however can be discussed, explained, and perhaps applied to our experience today and to the scripture texts that were read for us this morning. Our speaker, The Reverend Dr. Nancy Cocks, reminded us of something John Calvin wrote: *Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.*” She told us this to help us understand the importance of paying attention to our own story – our own life experience and that which we share as the church.

Nancy also showed us a model from Dan McAdams, a professor of psychology and human development at Northwestern University which is a way of understanding the way we think about our memories and how we tell them. This model defines four story “myths” or plotlines. The way that we see our memories – our life – our story, affects our self-knowledge and therefore the understanding that we bring into conversation with our knowledge of God. Ultimately then, the wisdom we possess is shaped in some ways by our perception of our own story.

The plotlines are simple and as we look at them in detail we might see our own experience and bits of scripture reflected or illumined.

1. We can move from a good past to a good future
2. We can move from a good past to a bleak future
3. We can move from a hard past to a better future
4. We can move from a bleak past to a bleak future

The first one is for those who tell their stories in a way that highlights the positive – the gift – the hope in their lives and in others. Stories that follow this line of thinking move from strength to strength and offer a tremendous sense of blessing. (Psalm 23)

The second reflects an attitude that the best has already happened and so those who think of their story this way anticipate that things are going to fall apart. They can feel discouraged and may say things like: “Don’t expect too much. Enjoy it while you’re young because things are only going to get worse.” (Psalm 137)

In the third pattern the idea of a silver lining is highlighted. People who tell their story this way have a conviction that change is possible – that we can make a difference. (Exodus/Revelation)

The fourth is a “black sheep” story – the one who feels hard done by and expects that life will always be unfair. This way of thinking can come from the cultural narrative in an economically deprived region or in a family that says, or implies, “you’ll never be as good as your brother.” (Job – or parts of it)

Perhaps you have no trouble finding your own way of thinking about the story of your life in this model. Certainly I quickly saw the plotline I believe the church has been living for many years. Can you hear it too? How many times have you heard or said, "We used to have..." and "Remember when..."? The good old days of the church are often talked about but I do wonder that if they were really so good as remembered, why so many people have left the church? And how did we get stuck telling our story as one that moves from a good past to a bleak future?

Our reading today from Romans says that *we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.* Moving from a hard past to a better future. John's Gospel points out that while having Jesus among them has been good, when the Advocate – the Holy Spirit – comes, we will be taught everything, and will be reminded of all that Jesus said. Moving from a good past to an equally good future. The Psalm similarly reminds us of the many blessings we are continually afforded at God's hand.

The Pentecost story told in the Book of Acts tells of people who have for days – even weeks – hidden themselves in fear for their lives – people who are now out and about and acting in astonishing ways. They are no longer living in secret. In fact, they are calling attention to themselves by their behavior. What has gotten into them? ...a touch of wacky juice perhaps? ...maybe some goofy gas ...or are they filled with new wine?

They are all filled with the Holy Spirit. These previously terrified people are all filled with the dynamic power of God – the power that refreshes and recreates – that comforts and heals. This Spirit burns within them like tongues of fire, and they go forth to proclaim the message of God's love revealed in the resurrection of Jesus.

Pentecost speaks loudly of God's work in and among us. It remains a time of deep challenge and extravagant joy, calling worshippers to be mindful again of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and in whom we live and move and have our being. It is a day when the divine Spirit comes to interrupt and call into question the inevitability of our despair. We are called to reevaluate the story we have been living – to see once again that whatever past we can remember – our future hope is in God's loving care and that is not only a story worth living, it is good news to share.

When the Spirit came to the early church, things weren't actually as calm and cheerfully hopeful as you might think. Most scholars agree that the sequence of events you find in the Book of Acts – Jesus' promise of the Spirit before he ascends into heaven, the peaceful and patient waiting in Jerusalem, the choosing of a new apostle – this was probably all constructed well after the fact, and reflects an idealization of the early community by Luke, whose own church community was experiencing a great deal of doubt and turmoil. Luke was addressing the theological and pastoral problems of his church: their experience of God's absence during a time of mutual hostility between the richer and the poorer members of the community.

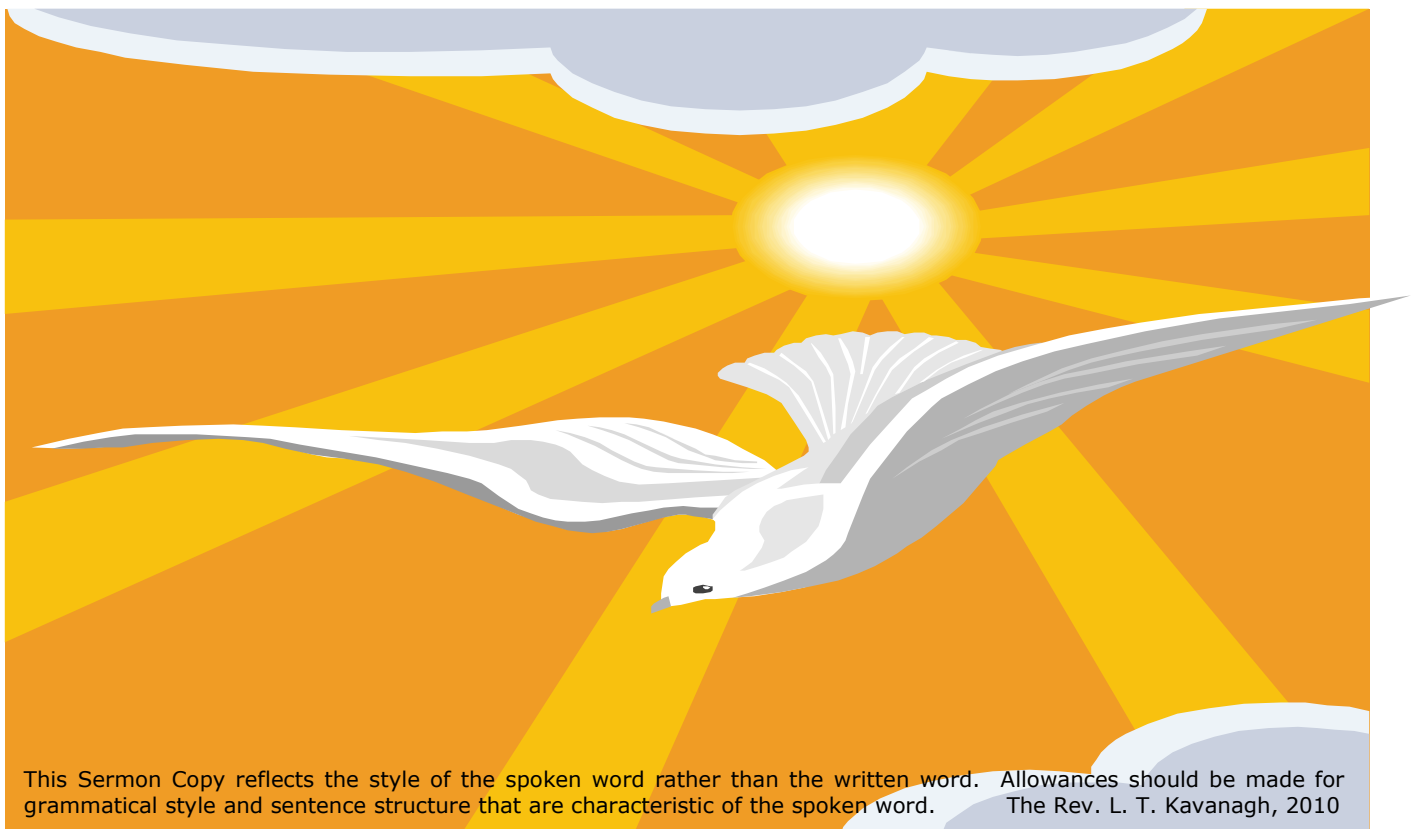
The Pentecost narrative promises Luke's community that even though things look bad – and they do look bad because there is a factional clash going on, and people seem unable even to speak a common language – but despite that, Luke says that the inevitability of split and dissolution is far from unavoidable. When the Spirit comes, Luke tells his church, the splinter groups are united under the call of God to a new mission and responsibility. Young and old, women and men, rich and poor, all are joined in a common vision; they are purged by fire and given a new breath to sustain

them in a unified and physical mission. *"We are the body of Christ; his Spirit is with us."* This is exactly what Luke was trying to tell his fractured community and what we must hear today. We can see our story as one moving toward a better future.

We tend to get stuck in the murky uncertainty of the church's future because we have stopped believing that God's promised blessing is assured. Joel tells us that in the last days God's spirit will be poured out – in a hope-filled future. The Lord's great and glorious day is yet to come although it is begun now in each one of us since all who call on God's name will be saved. Despite declining numbers and the departing disenchanting there is hope for the church – hope for Knox Church.

Surely the primary story of faith – the lived story of the church – is that we move from a hard past to a better future. We move from slavery to freedom – from wilderness to promised land – from sickness to wellbeing – from sin to salvation. We could also understand our story as one that moves from abundance to abundance, filled with blessing. Both are faithful ways to interpret our life in Christ.

The Holy Spirit is God's assurance that Christ remains with us even as we wait for Christ's kingdom, which has not yet arrived in its fullness. She is like new wine that the bridegroom sends on ahead – a little taste of the promised wedding party. The disciples were indeed drinking new wine – new wine of the Spirit. Life can be difficult, for sure, but the party has begun nevertheless – despair is not inevitable. The Holy Spirit – the dynamic power of God – is bestowed on us in all fullness. And with the Spirit come gifts that can transform the world. When the Holy Spirit comes, even the impossible is rendered possible once more. When the Holy Spirit descends upon us, even a small, damaged, and ridiculously diverse bunch like ourselves can begin to dream a common vision and join together in a common mission. Even we can believe in an abundant future as we share with others the Spirit of God that has gotten into us. **Amen**



This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2010