

“God made man because God loves stories.” Elie Wiesel said that.

We love stories, and we have a great summer ahead of us. Following the new lectionary (Revised Common Lectionary) we will hear stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs, all summer long: Abraham and Sarah (who, last week, were Abram and Sarai; what happened there?); Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and Esau, too; Joseph in Egypt, and his brothers; and, finally, moving ahead a couple of hundred years in antiquity, the prophet Moses.

All these are stories that were told and retold, savored, wondered at for generations before they ever were written down. I love to think of the ones who first told the stories, their *own* stories. Abraham, sitting at the fire late into the night, telling this one we heard this morning, to his household, to visitors to his tent. And when he comes to the part where Sarah was listening behind the flap of the tent, and “laughed to herself . . .” Sarah interjects and says again, this time with a twinkle in her eye, “I did *not* laugh!” And the old man replies, “Oh yes, you *did* laugh,” and they all laugh again, shaking their heads in wonderment at how God fulfilled the promise made to Abram so long ago when they were all back in Haran.

I love to think of Sarah herself, telling little Isaac the story of his birth, Isaac, her wonder child, her gift from God, her gift to Abraham, and all the generations that followed. Sitting among the women, she would tell how to her, a woman who was not only barren but old, advanced in age, with whom it had ceased to be after the manner of women, how to *her* God brought laughter. And everyone who heard laughed with her.

Our family stories, the births and deaths, the struggles, the near misses, disappointments, big surprises and quiet triumphs, are our treasures. We share them, with laughter and tears, telling and retelling them in the bosom of the family, at family reunions and holiday feasts. They are *familiar*, known even to the ones who were too young to remember or weren’t even born yet when great grandpa entertained angels, unaware, and great grandma laughed. They are well known among us, and at the same time, they feel private, somehow. We don’t tell just anybody about how this one came to be born, or that one tricked his brother but later was tricked himself by his uncle; or how another one’s older brothers were jealous of him, and sold him to a passing caravan. Besides, not everyone wants to hear these things; they have stories of their own.

How did the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs come to be so widely known, then? Why weren’t they kept private, told and remembered only within the family—especially the stories with more than a hint of scandal? There’s another dimension to these stories. They are much too big to keep on only one family tree—because God is also part of the story. God called each one of these people, led them, blessed them in ways they could not have imagined or created for themselves. The story of their family is the story of the whole family of God, all God’s children.

Like Abraham, Sarah and the others, we, too, have stories. Granted, ours is not a story of giving birth to a child when we were in our 90's. But we do have our own stories of impossible healing, redemption and new life.

There was a time when we faced a challenge with such clarity and courage that we knew they came from a source much greater than ourselves; a time when we knew that God was with us, and all would somehow be well.

There was a time when everything we had hoped and worked for was destroyed, and yet, in time, healing and reconciliation followed, and new life we never could have imagined.

There was a time when we were brought back from a way that was leading only to death. "I once was lost, but now am found." Amazing Grace.

As a priest, I often hear these kinds of stories; all priests and pastors do. I have heard some of your stories of struggle, loss, grief, and healing. Stories of resurrection, of new life that once seemed impossible. Yours are amazing stories of grace and encouragement that remind me again and again that God's gift of blessing did not stop with the matriarchs and patriarchs, nor even with Jesus and his apostles. The signs of God's healing and gifts of new life are present still, in the stories of our own lives and the lives of those we love.

Jesus sent out the twelve apostles to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" That is the same good news you and I have to tell, still, today. I will tell you some good news now, how the kingdom of heaven has come near here, in this part of God's family.

In the last few weeks, I found myself spending a lot of time in hospitals, praying with people before surgery, and while they were in surgery; sending out prayer requests, calling and visiting. Even at the time I realized I *might* have felt overwhelmed. But somehow I didn't.

By the grace of God, and *only* by the grace of God, I began to see what a tremendous amount of *healing* has been happening among us: new hips, new knees, so that people will soon be able to walk again without pain! Other surgeries that will enable people to live more vigorous and vibrant lives. This community has been showered of late with gifts of healing and new life; and I, for one, am here to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near!

That is a piece of my story. I am grateful for the good news you entrust me with. They are *your* stories of how God has done great, improbable, even impossible things in your lives. And they are *your* stories to tell, not mine. But the next time we are mulling over together what God has done in your life, don't be surprised if I ask, "Who *else* needs to hear this?"¹

¹I heard this wise and provocative question at a diocesan conference on evangelism, in a workshop led by The Revs. Heather Kirk-Davidoff and Nancy Wood-Lyczak.

Our stories, our good news of the kingdom of heaven come near, may seem private, something we're comfortable sharing only with a person of the cloth, maybe not even with members of our own family. But the stories of God's transforming love aren't for ourselves alone, to savor and hold close to the vest. They are given to us to give away.

The world is as full of anxious people, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, as in Jesus' day. They need to hear the good news, words of encouragement, reasons to hope, to believe that the way things are is not the way they have to be, and not the way they always will be. They need to hear how even now "things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new"²

How better for them to hear this than in *your* voice, telling the stories of your own life—how God has been gracious and loving, always present, even when you could not have believed it at the time.

God made man because God loves stories. We are made in God's own image, and like God we all love stories, too. And we have stories to tell!

²The Book of Common Prayer, p. 280.