

COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH FALL 2026

Story-telling and Sainthood

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ALL SAINTS' DAY

"Storytelling and Sainthood" | Ephesians 1:11-23 | The Rev. Jessica C. Scholten

Remember story time when you were a little kid? At school, maybe your teacher would sit in a chair and you and all your friends would circle around, and listen, vying for the front spot so you could see the pictures better: James and the Giant Peach, the Magic Treehouse, The Lightning Thief, Fancy Nancy, for those of us who are really old: the Boxcar Children. Whole new worlds opened up when you traveled through Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory with your first-grade teacher or you heard about all the made-up illnesses of a Shel Silverstein character in the poem titled, "Sick," who decides in the end they're perfectly fine after all when they find out it's actually Saturday and not a school day.

Or reading at bedtime with a parent—all the Dr. Seuss books, Little House on the Prairie, Harry Potter. What were your favorite stories?

How about this—there are plenty of storytelling images from movies—I'll give you a line; you yell out the answer:

"Has it got any sports in it?" "Are you kidding? Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles!" (Princess Bride)

"First, I traveled through the seven levels of the Candy Cane forest, passed the sea of twirly swirly gumdrops, and then I walked through the Lincoln Tunnel." (Elf)

Or how about this famous storyteller: "My mama always said, Life was like a box of chocolates." (Forrest Gump)

One of my all-time favorites is the story of how a wristwatch saved Harold Crick. I guess you'll have to google it. (Stranger Than Fiction)

The art of storytelling isn't just for kids' books and movies though. We practice it every day. We share stories over coffee, we listen around the dinner table, especially during holidays. We circle up in living rooms at birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, retirement gatherings.

Our faith is full of stories. David and Goliath, Elijah and the Whirlwind, Mary and the Angel. Pretty much every Sunday school lesson we had as children was based on stories.

Jesus told stories all the time—simple parables about gardening or everyday cooking items or pocket change—just ordinary things. Though sometimes his stories had extraordinary twists—

hilarious or outrageous endings that got you thinking or sometimes made people mad, like legalistic religious leaders.

What's the story from the Bible that sticks with you?

Mine is the story of the group of people who drop their friend through the roof so Jesus can heal him. I think I remember it so well, because I still remember the replica we made in Sunday school out of paper cutouts and popsicle sticks.

It is All Saints' Day, so today is the day we celebrate those saints who have recently died or we remember those people who we miss and who have influenced our lives. For we Protestants, saints are just those people who were or are Christians.

Here is a question to think about: What's a story about someone's faith that you admire?

Same with this question: How about a story when you felt God's love?

When the New Testament Epistles—letters—were written, they were for the purpose of encouraging newly formed faith communities to remember their core purpose: the stories of Jesus—of his life, example, healing, death, and resurrection—and the ways those stories have built and shaped the Christian community. Sometimes, if their readers were Jewish, they would also remind them of the Hebrew Scriptures—the stories of God's presence in all of history.

The author of our Scripture lesson this morning was writing to help nudge people toward a better understanding of who Jesus was, of the riches we inherit in faith, and of the hope that we have because of our faith.

Verse 13 reads: "In [Christ] you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." In other words, you have heard the stories of Jesus, and believed, and so you can live in faith.

The First Nations Version is an Indigenous Translation of the New Testament that was published just a few years ago. Native American culture is steeped in story-telling. Terry Wildman and the team working on this version translate this verse, "And now, not only we but all other Nations who have heard the truth of this message can participate in [God's] plan. This is the good story that sets all people free."

When we trust in the stories of our faith—when we live into promises of healing, justice, hope, and resurrection—we too are set free, no longer in bondage to the things that enslave us—achievement, addiction, hoarding, consumerism, power. Instead, we can find our worth in Jesus Christ. And we see the worth in every other human.

The spiritual practice of storytelling helps us to teach and to learn about faith in a pleasing way, a way that engages both the teacher and the listener. This engagement in faith through story is what helped the early church create community. Ephesians begins with a prayer: "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints."

The faith community was strong in Ephesus—so strong that before a letter to help strengthen the community gets much further, the author first gives thanks for their faith. And then he prays for even greater insight: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints."

Our inheritance is expounded upon in the rest of the letter—sit down sometime this week and read the whole thing in one chunk—it would only take you about a half hour, even though it takes a lifetime to absorb it—lavish grace, extravagant forgiveness, welcome and belonging, help to live a meaningful life, and the joy of new life in Christ.

Telling the stories of faith helps build us into the people of God in a variety of ways. Not only does it help us better understand faith, it also helps make us good listeners. Storytelling connects us through the generations and builds community. And hearing the stories of Scripture helps us find our own place in the story of God.

Who here is a good listener? Few people will raise their hands, because exactly the kind of people who are good listeners are usually not the kind of people who want everyone to look at how good they are at listening. That's the beauty of listening—it is entirely focused on the other.

A good listener gives their full attention, watching for facial cues and body language and listening to the words. And not listening to the words so you can figure out what you'll say next or so you can one up the story with your own, but simply to hear the story, maybe the intent or emotion behind the story, to be curious about what is being told to you. In these challenging political times, we know how quickly we can turn from listening to one another and providing space to trying to teach or change someone else, to refuting and dispute.

Good listening is a muscle we can build, so that we can focus on someone else instead of ourselves and **be still** even in our own discomfort. Which leads to another important aspect of storytelling—it connects us to one another.

I just spent a week of in-person class for a doctoral program. On Monday morning, nineteen of us walked in as strangers. Other than a few people who knew the professor, none of us knew each other. Only a few days later, we walked out as dear friends. Why such a deep bond so quickly? Because we shared our stories about meaningful truths in our lives about how Sabbath practices have shaped us, and we listened deeply to one another.

Through storytelling, we can connect more fully with each other, including across the generations and better known truth from first-hand accounts. I studied World War II in probably three different classes in high school and at least one in college, but I know more about it from my husband Tom's Uncle Lee's retelling of liberating Dachau than I ever learned in a classroom. And I've heard of the need for perseverance in faith, but nothing in a book can teach me what my great grandmother did about living through hard times with hope.

Storytelling, especially tellings stories from Scripture, is important because it helps us find our own place in God's story. When we hear the story of Jonah running in the opposite direction of

Nineveh, getting swallowed by a fish, and then barfed back up, it's like a fairytale. Until we think our own times we have tried to dodge God's call for us or put it off or shut our ears. And suddenly we realize all these stories of Scripture aren't to pass down facts but to open up our own lives to God's presence. Now. Today.

We find ourselves stargazing, and we too see the Holy like the wise so many years ago who saw God in the stars. We face impossible situations that feel like crossing an ocean while our enemies pursue us, and suddenly God parts waters for us as well, and we're on the other side. We get stuck over and over again in the same situation, and then we let something inside of us we'd held onto so tightly go—it dies and in its place is new life, and the resurrection story doesn't seem quite so far away anymore. We keep expecting to find God in the dramatic and exciting, and then like Elijah, we hear God in the still quiet moments.

So, as you go into this week, thinking about those who have gone before us and helped us root in faith, how do you find yourself in God's story? It's worth the reflection and search, because sometimes when you find yourself in God's story, you might just also find the story that sets you—and all of us—free.