

“Come and Listen”

Text: Psalm 66:16-20

Come and listen, all you who fear God, let me tell you what he has done for me. I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!

The theme for chapel this semester is “Telling the Stories of Faith,” and I am looking forward to hearing the stories of our speakers this semester. If you are like me, you have grown up in the church or have been to summer camp or been involved in youth ministries, and you are familiar with the genre of the faith story or the testimony. Often, particularly in the camp setting, the sharing of testimonies occurs late at night around a campfire. As you sat in the dark, you would often hear dramatic stories of conversion, the best of which often had a certain narrative shape to them. First, the person would describe, sometimes in great gory detail, the ugliness of their own sin or the effects of sin in their lives. They would be deeply involved in stealing, or gangs, or drugs, or pornography, or would have suffered from cancer or a car accident. Then, often with the help of a youth minister or pastor or camp counselor, they come to recognize the depth of their own sin, the consequences of that sin being hell, and Christ’s offer of love and forgiveness. They would then describe a turning away from sin toward Christ, a dramatic conversion to a new life that is almost exactly opposite to their early life. These stories are often inspiring both in their details and the transformation in people’s lives. And, of course, these stories have biblical precedent—the conversion of Saul to Paul, from the person who persecutes the Christians to the person blinded on the

road to Damascus, from the person holding the coats for those killing Stephen to the follower of Christ writing much of the New Testament.

Now, again, if you were at all like me, you would sit in the dark and say to yourself—darn, my story of conversion is so boring. Perhaps you, like me, suffer from what I call “Boring Testimony Syndrome.” Sure, I know that I am a sinner, but my sins are common and boring—not pornography but pride, not stealing but indifference to the poor, not gangs but gossip, not drugs but selfishness. Moreover, while I am committed to Christ, I don’t always see dramatic evidence of that commitment—no blinding lights on the road, no detox programs, no conversion of my gang friends, no writing of letters to the churches in Philippi. Instead, the narrative arc of my life has been much more ordinary. God has filled my life with good things: a loving family, educational opportunities, good churches, meaningful work, health, food, recreation. Yet, I am still often mired in petty sins and my times of doubt are often more intense and more frequent than my times of faith. Indeed, sometimes the blessings intensify the doubts because I feel as if I need to earn those blessings in order to enjoy them, and I know that I haven’t earned them. In fact, the doubts seem to be evidence that I have not mustered enough faith to deserve the blessings. It can be a vicious cycle.

Our theme verse for the semester comes from Psalm 66:16: “Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.” The psalmist recognizes that God works both through times of faith and times of doubt to bring us to himself. The psalm is split into two parts: the first twelve verses are a collective hymn sung by the people of Israel, and the last eight verses are an individual hymn of the psalmist. In the collective hymn, the people of Israel sing of how God remained faithful to them through times of rescue and times of testing. In verses 5-6, the psalmist reminds them of the Exile, the rescue from Egypt, and slavery: “Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man’s behalf! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the

waters on foot—come let us rejoice in him.” However, in verses 10-12, he also reminds them of times of testing: “For you, O God, tested us, you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.” The psalmist recognizes that God also uses trials to bring about his purposes among the people of Israel. And what is true at the collective level is also true at the individual level. The psalmist comes to God’s temple with “vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble,” but he is also convinced that “God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer” (66:14, 19). So, when we come to testify, when we come to tell what God has done for us, we should be ready to give witness and praise both for the moments of rescue and blessing, and for the moments of testing and doubt. I know that God has used both moments of faith and times of doubt to bring me closer to him. Today, I would like to tell you a few of the stories about those moments of faith in my life, particularly from my childhood. Later in the semester, I will share with you my stories of doubt.

Blessings of Family

One of those blessings of faith for me was being born into a family of believers. As far back as I know, my family has been committed Christians, a blessing for which I have increasingly become grateful as I have grown older. Moreover, my own initial commitment to Christ was largely shaped by my family. It happened on August 7 1970, when I was seven years old. Yes, I am one of those people who have a date that I can write in my Bible as my spiritual “birthday.” However, I have a deep respect for those who speak of their faith as a growing awareness of their commitment to Christ and who cannot point to any one moment of conversion. God works in our lives in a variety of ways, so we should expect that our stories of faith would have a great variety.

We were on a family vacation in the northern woods of Wisconsin. We were staying with my grandparents in a cabin next to a lake. The cabin came with use of a boat, and my father, ten-year-old sister, and I decided to take the boat to a nearby island for an overnight camping trip. As you might expect, I could hardly wait for this exciting adventure to begin. However, when we went down to the boat in the late afternoon, we discovered the tilt on the motor was not working, so we would not be able to land the boat on the beach of the island without ruining the motor. I was desperately disappointed, so my Dad decided to try to salvage the evening by setting up a campsite right there next to the boat dock. It sounded pretty lame to me, but what alternative did I have? So we set up the tent and collected wood for the campfire.

As we were roasting our hot dogs and eating chips, my sister began to talk about her experience at Bible camp. In particular, she talked about a friend who had been “saved” during her time at camp. Feeling a bit left out of the conversation, I blurted out that I was saved too. My sister in all of her fifth-grade sophistication and superiority looked at me quite skeptically, quickly corrected my theological error, and then explained in a matter-of-fact way its significance: “I don’t think that you are saved, which means, of course, that you are going to hell and it will be as hot as that campfire.” As you might imagine, I was a bit shaken by my sister’s revelation, and I thought that this day was definitely going downhill. I had woken that morning with plans for an exciting overnight on an island, and now my sister had just informed me that I was going to spend the rest of eternity separated from God in hellish flames.

My Dad wisely intervened and explained the gospel simply by quoting from John and Romans. With those scriptural passages, he explained about our sinfulness and need of salvation, of Christ’s death and resurrection as an act of love and as the means to bring about that salvation, and our response as one of faith in Christ’s work and obedience to his authority. Then we prayed together for Christ to become both Savior

and Lord in my life. I was so excited about the decision that I ran back to the cabin and told my mother and grandparents. We ended up abandoning the camping trip and slept back in the cabin that night. There was no dramatic change in my life. I returned home to second grade, rec-league basketball, and church on Sunday. I am still grateful, however, to point to that conversation as the beginning of my following of Jesus Christ. Moreover, while I am still not so sure about my sister's motives in declaring my eternal destiny, I am deeply grateful to God to be born into a family of faith that was ready to give witness to my need for Christ.

Blessings of Learning

The next spiritual blessing that I remember was a book recommendation. I know that too sounds incredibly nerdy, or at least boring, but I love to read and God has taught me so much about himself and his world through the books that I have read. I remember when I was ten years old and Margaret Schneider introduced me to *The Hobbit* in the basement library of Longfellow school. I read it in a week, and the rest of the Tolkien's trilogy in a month. I was both deeply saddened and deeply satisfied when I came to the end. I was saddened that there was not more to read about this adventure and satisfied because it was a story that rang of truth: the truth of courage against overwhelming odds, the truth of friendship being more important than accomplishment, the truth of self-sacrifice bringing about redemption. Moreover, it was a story with great battles, magic rings, elusive elves, fierce orcs, walking trees, and, most importantly, a story with the ultimate victory of good over evil by means that no one would expect. Frodo follows his calling, supported by his friend Sam, extending mercy to Gollum, and defeating overwhelming evil. Even though I didn't realize it at the time, Tolkien's story echoed the gospel story that was becoming central in my own life. God has used books ever since to teach me about himself and his world.

God also used teachers to help me understand himself and his world. I remember my high school English teacher who would sit cross-legged on his desk and laugh with delight at the puns in Shakespeare. Or the Greek teacher in college who would deepen our understanding of a verse by explaining the significance of a verb tense. Or the English professor whose lectures on Homer were as insightful about what it means to be human as any sermon that I had ever heard. Or the philosophy professor who made belief in Christ a reasonable, and not simplistic, proposition in the history of ideas. These teachers had a passion to understand Christ in all things and were not satisfied with easy answers from themselves or from their students. Their passion for learning and for faith was infectious, and that passion clearly shaped the direction of my own life. I am deeply grateful to God for the teachers that he has brought into my life. They have been one of life's great blessings.

Blessings of Church

Church was also a central part of my growing up. I know, boring again. We went almost every Sunday from nine to twelve. The first hour was a communion service, the second hour was Sunday school, and the third hour was preaching. Those mornings felt long, very long, when I was a young boy, and I can't say that I remembered a lot of specific content from the sermons or the Sunday school classes afterward. However, I do remember many of the memory verses that I learned during Sunday school. I do remember one of the elders in the church who would regularly get choked up with tears as he shared what God had been teaching him. And I do remember the smell of the potluck suppers as we would gather around the folding tables in the church basement. I do remember the cold water in the baptismal pool when I was baptized at twelve. And I remember sitting with my grandmother in church and having her give me a hard candy to pass the time. I also remember her funeral service in that same church. But what I most remember is being asked

to serve in the church—to be a shepherd in the Christmas pageant, to give devotions in youth group, to teach a Sunday school class, to run the boys' floor-hockey club, even to preach a sermon as a young college student. Church was a place to serve, not just a place to go. That challenge to serve was a great encouragement to my spiritual life even if I didn't always recognize or appreciate it at the time, and I am grateful to God for the blessing of that challenge.

The other lasting church memory for me was the weekly communion service. It was an unscripted service. It would start with an opening prayer, and then someone might suggest the singing of a hymn, and another person would read a Scripture and explain it, and then perhaps volunteer another hymn or prayer, and so on. There were often periods of silence, sometimes for as long as five to ten minutes. The service would always conclude with the passing of the bread and the wine. As a young boy, I was often bored and distracted during the service. However, as I grew older, I came to appreciate its rhythms better. I came to see how the hymns and scriptural reflections would often build on one another, how the silence would often serve as an important counterpoint to the speaking—a time for Christ to speak to us instead of us speaking about him. I also became increasingly aware of how the momentum of the service culminated in the taking of the bread and drinking from the cup. All of our talk ended in this simple action; all of the singing ended in this collective movement; all of the mess of our individual lives united and reconciled in this tangible act of participating together in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

So, as the theme verse suggests, come and listen, all you who fear God, and let me tell you what he has done for me. Come and listen, even to my boring testimony about family, books, teachers, and church, because God has shown his faithfulness to me and, I expect, to many of you, in those ordinary things. Come and listen to the stories of faith from others in whom God has been at work. You may respond to those

stories with sympathy because they resonate with your own life, with skepticism because they do not, with longing for God to do more in your life, or with fear because he may be doing too much. Perhaps you will respond by telling your own story, even if it is boring, to your friends, or your family, or even a stranger.

Most of your responses to the stories this semester will be private, between you and God, which is okay. However, as I learned in all of those Sunday morning communion services growing up, Christ does not only call us to come and listen; he also calls us to take and eat, to give testimony to our hope in the risen Christ by eating the bread and drinking the cup. In communion we give witness to our decision to follow Christ, a calling that I first heard clearly some forty years ago on the edge of a lake in northern Wisconsin, and a calling that has made all the difference in my ordinary and flawed life. So, JBU, on this cold morning at the beginning of a new semester, let us not just come and listen; let us also take and eat and commit ourselves again to live out our witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in thought, word, affection, and deed. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

May it always be true of us.