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Well, good morning, everyone. Love the fact that our kids were up here. Love seeing the little kids. There were a few that did not love and were not as triumphal, as triumphant as others. I think Cooper was having a hard time with the palm branches.

They can be a little overwhelming. I get it. But I love the kids up here singing their praise, using sign language. That is amazing. We're glad you're here this morning.

We do have these two very comfortable sofas for our high tithers. So if you identify as a big giver, these seats are for you. They're like opera boxes. We don't give them out to everyone. But if.

Man, if you're a big giver, right here they are right in the front. I don't know how these landed up here. I think it was a joke. But they've been here for a couple of weeks. So I say if you do, no joking.

If you want to take advantage of some very comfortable seats. I do not spit in either of those directions. So you're pretty safe this. But they are here. You guys.

John, Trudy, you guys don't want these comfortable seats here. Okay. Okay. I'm just saying. You're welcome.

You're welcome. The kids. If you've never seen this before with kids waving palm branches, there is a reason the church does this. And it comes from the Gospel of Luke. Luke's one of the books in the Bible that tells about the life of Jesus when he was on earth.

And it comes from Luke chapter 19. And here's how the passage reads. And if you are comfortable doing so, just read this along with me. Okay? As he approached Bethphage and Bethany, at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden.

Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, why are you untying it? Say, the Lord needs it. Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, why are you untying the colt?

And they replied, they brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt, and put Jesus on it. And as he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. And when he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, I've been on that road, and so has Allen. So if some of you, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen. And

they said this.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord, peace in heaven and glory in the highest. Now, that blessed is the king is a translation of a Aramaic word, Hosanna. And that's why when the kids came through, they sang, hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna. On Palm Sunday, the Sunday that we're celebrating today, over 2,000 years ago, the streets of Jerusalem echoed with the shouts of people who had seen Jesus miracles. They had heard his teaching.

They had personally encountered his power. Perhaps these were people who experienced Jesus and decided to follow him. They became his disciples. They couldn't stay silent in that moment. They had to share what they had witnessed.

Just like them, we also have a story to tell. When we share the good news of Jesus, we don't need to have all the answers. Those disciples didn't know half of the stuff that Jesus had done. They didn't know hardly anything about what Jesus would do. All they knew is that they had had an encounter with Jesus.

And like them, we don't have to have all the answers. We simply need to be willing to share what we know about Jesus, what he's done for us. So this week, we're gonna continue a series that we started two weeks ago where we learn how to talk about that in a natural and a confident way. And see that we're not here to argue. We're not here to pressure people into following Jesus.

We're simply sharing with them the hope that we found and inviting them to experience that same hope. So we're going to dig in, and I'm going to. If you want to turn in your Bibles to second Corinthians or first Peter, you can pick which verse, which book you want to go to. First Corinthians, First Peter. They're a little bit further along in your Bible.

They're both letters. One from Paul, one from Peter. And you can go ahead and turn to one or the other, and we'll get there eventually. I'm going to pray as you're doing that. Heavenly Father today, as we gather here to worship with, with these young kids in our midst, leading us in this moment of again speaking out our hosannas.

Our blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We want to learn how to do that, not just here in the confines of a church building, but we want to do that with the people that we love, that are close to us but are still far from you. So help us to do that in natural, engaging, and fruitful, effective ways. We pray that in Jesus name. Amen.

So the last assignment Jesus gave his disciples is at the end of the Gospels. And he tells his disciples this big thing says, I want you to

go into all the world and share what you've learned from me. We call that in the church. We call that the Great Commission. And that's an assignment for all of us, not just for those early disciples.

But if you've ever been in a place where you get the chance to do that, it can be a little bit scary. Anyone ever get the chance to share about Jesus? And you're like, am I the only one? Am I the only one that feels intimidated sometimes? Okay, I see a few hands raise up.

You're like those little kids. Listen, we're not Baptist. We can get our hands all the way up. If you want to do that, we can do that. I saw a few people this morning worshiping with their hands all the way up.

Y'all can do it. It's all right. Sharing our faith story can be scary because one, as Steve says, we don't want to offend anyone. What if we say something and they're really ticked off that we share it? Or what if they ask me a question that I don't know the answer to?

So today we're just gonna go again in a very practical way, talk about how we can share our story with some good tools when that opportunity arises. So two weeks ago, we started this acronym called bless. B L, E, S, E. That's how you spell bless. Spell it with me.

B, L, E, S, S. The B is just the first word of Begin with prayer. Begin with prayer. And you can do that right now. Right now, you can start praying for someone who is close to you but far from God.

The second L is that when you get the chance to be up close and personal with them, the first L is listen, listen, listen. Well, as we talked about last week, listening well is. Is loving. Well, listening and loving mean the same thing to people. And then we ended with E two weeks ago.

Well, my favorite one E. Just. Just eat together and. And eating together is a fairly, fairly loose definition. It could be a cup of coffee.

It could be some lemonade on the porch. It could be sharing a sticker bar as your going to a gym. I don't know. I don't know what you do but share a meal with them. Because Jesus used meals to make connections with people, and you can, too.

So share a meal and make some connections like Jesus did. So that brings us to today. And today we're gonna be looking at two S's, and they both stand for story. Your story and his story. So we're gonna share our story together.

Now they've got serving there. We do a great job serving. And we're

not going to land on that so much. We're going to land on the sharing of the stories. So Paul urges believers to share their story.

And this is where we get to Second Corinthians. Second Corinthians 3, verses 2 and 3 say this. Here's what he writes to the Corinthians. You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to one known and read by all as you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. Now, if you study civilization through the years, you will come across some very interesting ways that people have learned to communicate with each other over long, long distances.

Here in North America, Native Americans used smoke signals. And from long distances, they could communicate with each other just using different smoke signals. Back in the day, armies, military groups used flags. They could put flags up and they could tell what was going on based on the type of flag that was being flown. If you go to West Africa, you can still find people who know how to do this.

It's changed a lot in the modern age. But there are people who know how to use drums, certain types of drums that can mimic the human voice. The way they drum can mimic the intonations of the language that they speak. And it can be heard over four to five miles away. That's an incredible way to communicate.

But in Paul and Peter's time, the primary way that the early Christian leaders used to communicate to share Jesus across long, long distances were through letters. And so in this letter that Paul writes to the believers in Corinth, we call it the Letter to the Corinthians, or Corinthians. Paul writes that our story is like one of these letters. It's a letter designed to be shared with others, to connect others to God. And again, Paul wasn't the only one who used this idea of our lives being a message.

God, Peter himself says that we need to consider ourselves as communicators, as messages, and as messengers of God's work of salvation. So if you've got First Peter, here's the scripture that we're going to be looking at. First Peter, chapter three, verses 15 and 16. So Peter tells this to the believers that he's writing to. He says, in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord and always be prepared.

If you write in your Bibles and there's no reason why you shouldn't underline, always be prepared. That's a key phrase there. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. So always be prepared. How do we prepare ourselves to be a letter that others can read?

Well, we can pray. We've got that word again. We begin with prayer and we continue with prayer. Prayer is important because prayer reminds us

that heart transformation is ultimately a work of God by the Holy Spirit. Sean says the heart is the Holy Spirit's territory.

I love that. It reminds us that our story, no matter how compelling it is, isn't sufficient on its own to transform anyone. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. And so we can relax a little bit when we're sharing our testimony with others. It's not all on us.

The Holy Spirit is given to us for the purpose of telling our story. Here's what Acts says. Acts, chapter 1, verse 8. Jesus tells his disciples this. When the Holy Spirit, when God's spirit comes on you, you will be filled with power and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, even remember Samaria, if you know that story.

That's a place they didn't expect to be sent to. But Jesus says, yeah, I'm going to send you to unexpected places and to the ends of the earth. So did you catch that? We will be effective witnesses as a result of, of the Holy Spirit's presence and the Holy Spirit's power. It's not all on you.

However, our story, our witness is an important part the process the Holy Spirit uses to bring someone to himself. So as you prepare to share your story with someone who is close to you but far from God, pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you. The second thing that I think is so important is just be real. Be who you are. I've got a friend, Roland Bettman.

Roland worked with Wheeler Mission up in Bloomington for many, many years. And he admitted once in talking to me that he. That when sharing his own faith story, it felt a little bit like meh compared to some of the stories that the guys at the Wheeler Mission were sharing. I mean, again, these guys are. It's Wheeler Mission, if you don't know it, is a treatment, an alcohol treatment, a recovery center for men and who are coming out of some pretty rough situations.

And so these are men who have committed crimes, who have used and dealt drugs, who've spent time in prison and through that process found Jesus. And now they're living fruitful and healthy lives in Christ. Amazing transformation stories that these guys have to share. As Roland said, these are glory to gory. Let me start all over again.

These are gory to glory stories. Say that with me. So if I mess that up again, you know what I'm talking about. Gory to glory stories. Rowland said, those are amazing stories, but my story is not nearly that exciting.

But he says, but here's what I realized. My sin, even though it was a lot more boring than that sin, still separated me from God just as much as theirs had. So gory to glory stories have their place. But if

that's not your story, that's all right. Your story has a place as well.

So tell the story the way it happened. Be real. Resist the temptation to compare your story with others or to make your story a little bit more exciting. That doesn't bring God any more glory than just telling your story. So whether your story is glory to glory, I feel like I could put this, this section right here to music and we can make a rap out of it or something.

So whether your story is gory to glory or simply, I once was blind, but now I see that's all right. Your story is unique to your life and an authentic testimony of what God has done in your life. Powerful. So just be you and then be focused. So you're going to pray, you're going to just be yourself, you're going to be real and you're going to be focused.

So remember, this is your faith story. Not your whole story, not your life story. This is your faith story. Steve and Tammy Wilkinson did a class a couple of years ago, and in that class they taught me this important concept. When you're telling your spiritual story, the point and the reason you're doing it is to point people to Jesus.

So stay focused on that. And so to help tell your story and remain focused and not get distracted by all the other things that have happened in your life, you focus on three things. What was my life like before Jesus? So just think about that for just a second. What was your life like before Jesus?

Before you surrendered your life to Christ, before you started following Jesus earnestly, what was your life like? Put that into a couple of sentences. You don't have to go into excruciating, painful detail. Just, here's what my life was like before. And then, and then there's the second moment, which is the moment that you made a decision to follow Jesus.

Now for some people, that is a moment. That is, that's decision made in an instant. Mine wasn't. Mine was a process of slowly coming to the realization that I needed to follow Jesus and then saying yes to Jesus. So maybe it's the, it's.

Maybe it's a dramatic like, like Damascus Road experience like Paul had, if you know his story. But maybe it's a, it's a longer process where you thought through a lot of stuff and you processed through a lot of stuff and you slowly came to a realization that you needed to follow Jesus. That's something, that's the second part. Then the third part is this. How's your life been since now?

Here's my story just in a nutshell. My life before Christ. Well, I accepted Christ when I was 12 years old, so I didn't really have a lot

of opportunity to get a gory story going. Now, that doesn't mean that I didn't manage to break, I would say, a large percentage of, of the Ten Commandments. Before I was 12.

I don't think I ever carved an idol and worshiped it. And I never committed some other sins at 12 years old, but I got a lot of them in. I was a high achiever, so I managed to get a lot of them in. I stole, I lied, I cheated, I was disrespectful to my parents. I definitely coveted what was not mine.

So when the preacher read out in Romans 3:23, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, I knew that that included me. I needed a savior. So at 12 years old, I said, I want to officially say that I'm a Christian. So I accepted Christ. Now, I didn't know everything in that moment, but I knew that in receiving Christ I received God's forgiveness.

And I knew that in receiving Christ my life was going to be different because. Because God was now living in me through the Holy Spirit. And I knew that as I received Christ and was baptized that I joined his new family. So I knew those three things. A lot of us get baptized not even knowing that much, but I knew that much.

And that's pretty much the bulk of what I knew. I knew enough to get me started. And that's what I would say to those of you who are wrestling with this idea of being baptized and not sure you're, you know enough or you're good enough or you're ready enough, I would just say this. You're never going to be Enough. That's why we have Jesus.

So if you are wrestling with the decision to be baptized, quit wrestling and say yes to that now. Since that moment, my life after receiving Christ, I live with now three teenagers and they can testify to this, that my life is not sinless or perfect. I get mad, I get angry. I have learned words and I have come really close to using words that I would have never used before. In many ways, my life has gotten a little bit rougher since accepting Christ.

But here's what is different in the roughness and the up and down and the roller coaster ride of life. As we say yes to following Jesus, what we find that everything he assigns to us and gives us in many ways, heavy responsibilities, heavy opportunities, heavy. Some of us might say this burdens that he lays on us. As followers of Jesus, I find that what I can do is take those burdens and give them to Christ. He says, bring and lay those burdens on me.

There's many burdens. Jesus never asks us to pick up the shame, the guilt once we lay those down. He says, never touch those again. But there are some things that Jesus calls us to do. I'm off my testimony by right now.

I'm preaching again. There are things that Jesus will call you to do in life that are hard, difficult, challenging things. Jesus does not call us to a life of ease when we say yes to Him. Get that out of your mind. Anyone who says your life is going to be easy, once you say yes to Jesus, they are lying to you.

They are a false prophet. You might as well take them out and stone them. That's not the truth. Life gets hard. Can I get someone to say amen that life gets hard when we follow Jesus?

But the beautiful thing is that Jesus says, cast your cares, cast your burdens on me. So then when we are going through the difficult things, Jesus is there. We do not go through them alone. He actually takes those and carries them for us as we walk through the things that he's called us to walk through. And this is my testimony as I've said yes to difficult things, challenging things.

What I have found that Jesus is there in ways that I cannot imagine. I am doing things that in my own strength there is no way I could do. I am shouldering responsibilities and challenges that in my own I cannot do. But in Christ I can do all things. Because not only does he strengthen me as the scripture says, he says, cast all your cares on me because I care for you.

I will carry that burden. So what I'm learning my Faith story is this that I've lived in, and I am living in my favorite song, the goodness of God. Another amen. So that's it. That's my testimony, sort of in a nutshell, plus a little extra what my life was like before I became a Christian, how I became a Christian, and now how has Jesus changed my life?

And it's not just how he changed my life 17 years ago when I said yes to Jesus, but how is he changing my life today? That's the other thing that Steve and Tammy were talking about. It's like our testimony is today, like, what does it mean now to walk with Jesus? And that's it. The fourth thing is this.

Just be normal. Just be normal about it. Can we just all say we don't need more weird people in the world? Just be normal? One of the things that I think attracted people to Jesus was that when he describes deeply spiritual things, he uses very ordinary, plain examples.

He talks about sheep, he talks about seeds, he talks about bread, he talks about servants, he talks about sons, he talks about farmers, he talks about shepherds. And when we talk about our faith with others, we need to keep it understandable. There is absolutely no need to wander off into muddy, deep theological waters. That is, you don't need to. You don't need to worry about that.

And when they try to drag you in that place, just say, you know what?

I just. I'm just here to talk about Jesus. That's. That's really what I know.

You don't need to. You don't need to do that. Maybe that can come later. But for now, we simply communicate like Jesus communicated. We keep the message simple.

We keep it uncomplicated. Tell them what Jesus has done for you. I love John 3:16. It's a verse that sometimes we use so much, we quit listening to what this verse tells us. John 3:16 and John 3:17 are absolutely phenomenal ways to share a testimony.

And here's what these verses say. God loved you so much that he gave us Jesus, his only son. And if we put our trust in him, we won't perish. We won't disappear. We won't be forgotten.

We won't be lost. We won't be destroyed. Instead, we will have eternal life. Now, that's an amazing verse, John 3:16. But here's what John 3:17 says.

And for those of us who grew up in a religious culture where we felt the continual weight of guilt and shame on us despite saying yes to Jesus, here's what John 3:17 says. Here's what it says. God did not send Jesus to condemn us. God did not send. If you need to turn to John 3:17 right now, go there because this is important.

God did not send Jesus to condemn us. God sent Jesus to save us. We are being rescued by God who loves us. That is an amazing testimony right there. Now, all this shouldn't take too long.

Remember, it's your faith story, not your entire story. Short and simple is often so much better than long and overly detailed. Just keep it simple because remember, you're listening. You're listening. Now, one of the things that Steve and Tammy had us do is write our testimony out.

And I know for some of you it's like, what is this, homework today? Well, maybe. Maybe you need to go home and write out your testimony. Growing up Pentecostal, I like to think that the Holy Spirit will just give me the words when I need the words. Anyone like this, like, I'll just show up and maybe it'll.

Miracle will happen and I'll just start talking and God will transform my words. Be like the gift of tongues all over again and people just hear what God wants them to hear and I can just spout nonsense. That's not helpful. Remember what Peter said way back there and we were going to underline it? Maybe you did.

Always be prepared. Always be prepared. I've always found in leading worship or even preaching a sermon that the Holy Spirit loves it. When

I've done what I need to do, when I've done my homework, when I've put some effort and attention into preparation. Because more often than not, the Holy Spirit works through the plan, not despite the plan.

Can I get an amen on that? Maybe you've experienced that. I will say this. More often than not, the Holy Spirit works through the plan, not despite the plan. So write it down.

Run it by a friend or a trusted person who can help you make sure the story remains focused on the glory of God and that Jesus remains the main character in your faith story. So who do you need to share your faith story with? Who in your life is close to you but far from God? Is there a name that comes to mind right now? Here's the question.

Do you care enough about them to share your faith with them?

If you do, then I'm going to pray a prayer. And when I say blank, you put that person's name. I'll just pray it out loud and you pray it with me in your head. But just mentally put your person's name in that spot and we're just going to pray with, pray for them right now. So let's bow our heads together.

Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, today I pray for that person.

Father, you love them more than I do. So I pray that you would help me love them. You do give me a heart for them to see them come into your kingdom.

So I pray for a clear opportunity this week, if possible, to share my faith story with them. And when we meet, Holy Spirit, guide our conversation. Holy Spirit, help me to listen well, and when I speak, help me point to you in everything that I share and everything that I say. And then, Holy Spirit, let me trust them to you. And in that way I will honor commission that you gave me to share my faith with others.

And we pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.

There's one other reason as we come to this time of communion, there's one other reason why knowing our faith story is important. And it, and it's pointed to and hinted at at the very last book in the New Testament, the very last book in your Bible, the book of Revelation. And in Revelation, chapter 12, verse 11, it says this, it says, they triumphed over him. And who is the him? Well, the him is the enemy, the devil.

They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb, and get this, by the word of their testimony. Now, this is not saying that our testimony is on par with the blood of the Lamb, but it is saying this, that our testimony is key to overcoming the intentions and the evil plans of

the enemy. Being able to tell our own faith story is powerful. To overcome the one who would defeat us from within, often by trying to drag us back into this place of, of sin and shame, often by telling us our old story. So knowing our new story, knowing our glory story is important to counter the lies of the enemy.

Our testimony is powerful, but it's predicated on what the blood of the Lamb. They overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. So the blood of the Lamb references Jesus, who took our life story and made it a faith story by what he accomplished on the cross. So today, as we share in this time of communion, we remind ourselves that that triumphal entry, the palm branches and the people singing praises, it led someplace and it led to a cross. On Thursday night, here, on Friday night with our community, we will gather together to remember in very, very powerful ways that moment of sacrifice.

But for now, as we take the cup and as we take the bread, this is a moment to give thanks to Jesus for offering up himself to the cross so that our life story can be redeemed and transformed into a faith, into a glory story by the blood of the Lamb. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this moment to share in this moment with each other together. Our stories have changed from we were blind to the place where we now see where we were lost but we are now found. All because you so loved us that you gave us your only son that whosoever, anyone whoever would put their trust in him would not perish and be gone forever but would have eternal life with you. Thank you that you did not come to make us feel horrible and to condemn us, but you came to love us and save us.

And for that we take the cup and we take the bread with gratitude and thankfulness. In Jesus name, Amen.

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