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**“A Story about Time”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time / Children’s Sabbath (Year A)

October 19, 2014

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1–9

Many of our adult members have served as mentors for our confirmation students over the years, for which I am very grateful.

I have in my possession a record, a stack twelve-years-deep, of faith timelines from confirmants and from those who have served as their mentors, or as teams of mentors, much like Paul, Silvanus and Timothy.

As you have reflected upon your life:

the historical happenings of your lifetime,
the personal milestones of your journey,
the pantheon of saints who have influenced your spiritual growth,
and the personal highs and lows of your life,

they suggest where, perhaps, you caught a glimpse of God’s hand at work, nurturing your faith, teaching you to hope, encouraging you to love in sacrificial ways.

In a way, I consider myself most fortunate because I am privy to these beautiful unfolding, to these deeply personal testimonies of particular faith journeys, which bear witness to something greater than yourselves, to something beyond yourselves, and point to a God who has chosen to be revealed in your particular lives which you have been so willing to share with your confirmation partners.

By the way, we call this “testimony” in the Christian tradition!

I have this stack of your faith journeys on yellow paper

because they bear witness to the light, to the light without,

which has become the light within each of you over time.

You see, these are also all stories about time.

For example, I have a faith timeline from Jim Seitzer,

who grew up during the Great Depression,

who served in World War II and the Korean War,

noting that there are no atheists in the foxholes,

and who attached himself to his wife, BJ, and to the church as he has lived in

many different places.

I have the faith timeline of Parker Morton, whose spiritual life was influenced

by witnessing his grandparents’ baptisms, as well as by the birth of his grandson.

I have the faith timeline of Homer Ashby, whose spiritual life led him

to join Dr. Martin Luther King’s march on Washington in 1963

and to conscientiously object to war.

And I have the faith timeline of Sue Fricks, who names influential people

in her faith journey, and who speaks honestly of a series of faith crises

that occurred, and to dreams that played a role in her walk with God.

I hope I am not betraying your trust when I share these stories because they are

all quite precious in their uniqueness. No two are alike.

And yet, they all are alike in that they are stories about time.

These are stories about finite time, about flesh and blood human beings,

about the boundaries of geography and circumstance, and about

relationships that have helped and hindered life journeys.

And yet, God comes into our time, and into our mortality, and into our limited

way of being in the world, and chooses us as God’s instruments and vessels.

In the history of theology, thinkers like Lesslie Newbigin and C.S. Lewis

have wrestled with what has come to be called *the scandal of particularity*.

It says, in short, that all theology is local:

that the universal God is behind the history and geography of the particular,
that God entered human history in the form a particular man, Jesus,
 who was born to a particular Palestinian Jewish family of limited means,
 unwed, and unpedigreed,
at a particular place, Bethlehem, of Judea, in a grotto, used as a stable,
that he worked in a particular trade as a carpenter;
that he lived and moved under the oppressive government of an occupied state,
and that he died a particularly brutal kind of death.

And so by like-sign, the holy, the divine also is made manifest in our
particular lives, if we are open to that possibility:

in Vacation Church School discussions, in the deaths of our parents,
through the influence of our spouses, in getting our tonsils out, in Girl Scouts,
 in our frequent moves, through the advice of friends,
through tragic assassinations and unjustifiable wars, through faith crises
 and foxhole experiences.

God enters into time, our time, makes it holy and sanctifies it.

Yet you might not know that by reading these faith timelines.

In linear sequence, they chart the knowns: the wars, the assassinations,
the civil rights milestones, the scandals, the lunar walks, the terrorist acts.

They are simple black hatch marks on sheets of yellow paper.

And yet the amount of yellow far exceeds the black.

 The unknown far exceeds the known.

Is that God? Was that God? Did we catch a glimpse here?

 Were we motivated by some unseen force there, a *deus ex machina*?

Was there purpose beyond mere achievement driving us then?

The Apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians,
commending them for their faith.

But he doesn't commend them for just following Jesus as we might expect.
He commands them for being "imitators of us"—of himself, Silvanus, and Timothy—
of saints who have tried to testify to the power of God in their own lives.
He commends them for the faith which influenced their work,
for the love that prompted their labor,
and for the hope that compelled them to continue
with faith, love, and hope being the other great triangle in which we live.
And he thanks them for being models for all believers, even *in times* of great suffering.
Time is all we have, a short amount of time to let God's yellow suffuse our black.
During this interim period in our FPC church history,
I think it is important for me to remind you that Mark, Sam, or I
do not have to be the center of the church's testimony.
You are shining examples for all believers,
of God becoming known through the particular stories and times of your lives.
And I am grateful to all of you for allowing our youth and our children
to look over your shoulders and witness your lives as you have
lived them in the mysterious light of God's love. Amen.



A Story About Time

Maybe you've heard about the new movie that's out called *Boyhood*.
It's a documentary film, shot in what they call "real time,"
filming a real little boy, Mason, as he grows up,
a few days each year for 12 actual years, from age 6 to age 18
There are no gimmicks in the movie, no special effects.
The film's premise is simple: a child, like you, grows up to be a young adult.

The film starts with a little boy with a pudgy face, gazing up at the sky.
It shows Mason giggling with friends over pictures of women in a lingerie catalogue.
It shows him trying to maintain a normal relationship with his biological father
from whom his mother is divorced,

on a camping trip where his voice suddenly changes,
developing a passion for photography at school,
dealing with his mother's unhappiness and his stepfather's alcoholism,
growing quieter at home but flirting with girls at school,
having his heart broken at age 15 not by a girl,
but by his father who sells the car he had promised to give to Mason
when he turned 16.

His life is ordinary, ordinary, ordinary—no special effects, no magic, no real tragedies,
no out-of-bounds intercessions, and yet it exudes a holiness.

It is a story about the unfolding of a particular boy in a particular body,
in a particular family, in a particular place, in a particular time.

(Kathryn Reklis. "Experiments in Time." *The Christian Century*. Sept. 17, 2014, p. 42)

Each one of us is finite, and God gives us the gift of a limited number of days
to live our unique lives in very human ways: birth, death, building, healing,
weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, embracing, refraining,
keeping silent, loving, hating, peace-making.

And there is a beauty and a holiness to that if we realize
that these are the parameters in which God makes all things possible
through us, through you!

An article recently on the last page of *The Economist*
lifted up a beautifully unique life that this world has lost.
It eulogized a man named William Oliver, a conservationist
known worldwide for his passion and research,
championing, of all things, the wild pigs of the world!

He was chairman for 32 years of a special sub-group
within the International Union for the Conservation of Nature
called "Pigs, Peccaries, Hippos and Wild Pigs."

He could watch wild pigs for hours, and his life's work was to learn
how to find, observe and protect them.

Why am I telling you this?

Because his passion developed when he was a young boy,
a particular boy in a particular town in England in the early 1950s,
who just happened to fall in love with a book about animals that always
fell open to the same page that featured a picture of a pygmy hog.

He became obsessed with that picture and begged his nanny
to take him to the British Museum to see a stuffed pig,
and that is when his passion for wildlife in general,
and pigs in particular, began.

Is that God at work in a particular life, I have to wonder?

Is that just curiosity, or is there a force beyond ourselves
that compels us to care deeply for some things and not so deeply for others?
("Obituary, William Oliver." *The Economist*. September 27, 2014, p. 94)

I have the faith timelines that many of you did when you were in Confirmation
as well.

I have James Compton's timeline that notes the particular events that happened
in time during his life: the Beijing Olympics, his great-grandmother's death,
Obama elected president twice, the Japanese tsunami, Hurricane Katrina,
not making one special soccer team but making another,
a high schooler being murdered by friends,
his first school dance and his first bible.

I have another youth's faith timeline where he notes when he started playing music,
when his great-grandpa died, and when his dog died.

And I have a particularly poignant faith timeline from a female youth
which notes when she learned what it means to be an atheist,
when she discovered what it means to be a racist,

and about a time in her life when she was so miserable
that she underlined in her bible, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
These are beautiful stories about time, as you grow up in time,
as you watch your grandparents and parents grow old,
as you model your lives after them
and after other people of faith, your mentors and your teachers
who have been so gracious to let you look over their shoulders
as they have tried to live their lives faithfully.

Boyhood could be a movie about your life, or *Girlhood* could be a movie about your life:
ordinary, ordinary, ordinary when you write it down in black ink
but suffused with the light of God when you inscribe it on yellow paper
and wonder what holds it all together, what links events line to line,
what drives it forward, what brings people into it and takes
them out of your timeline, what influences your passions and personality.
"God's message sounds forth from you and rings out from your life,"
the Apostle Paul says.

People are listening to your lives, too, for hints and glimpses of God at work.
You are young, and you have more yellow than black on your timelines.
Perhaps we adults are the ones who should be imitating you
as your lives are being shaped and transformed by human and divine factors.
The living God is alive in you, in the story about your lives,
in the real time that God has given you to come and go on this earth,
in the relationships being woven into your young lives.
We thank you for sharing your lives with the church, for blessing our time
with your time, and with what inspires you to hope, faith, and love. Amen.